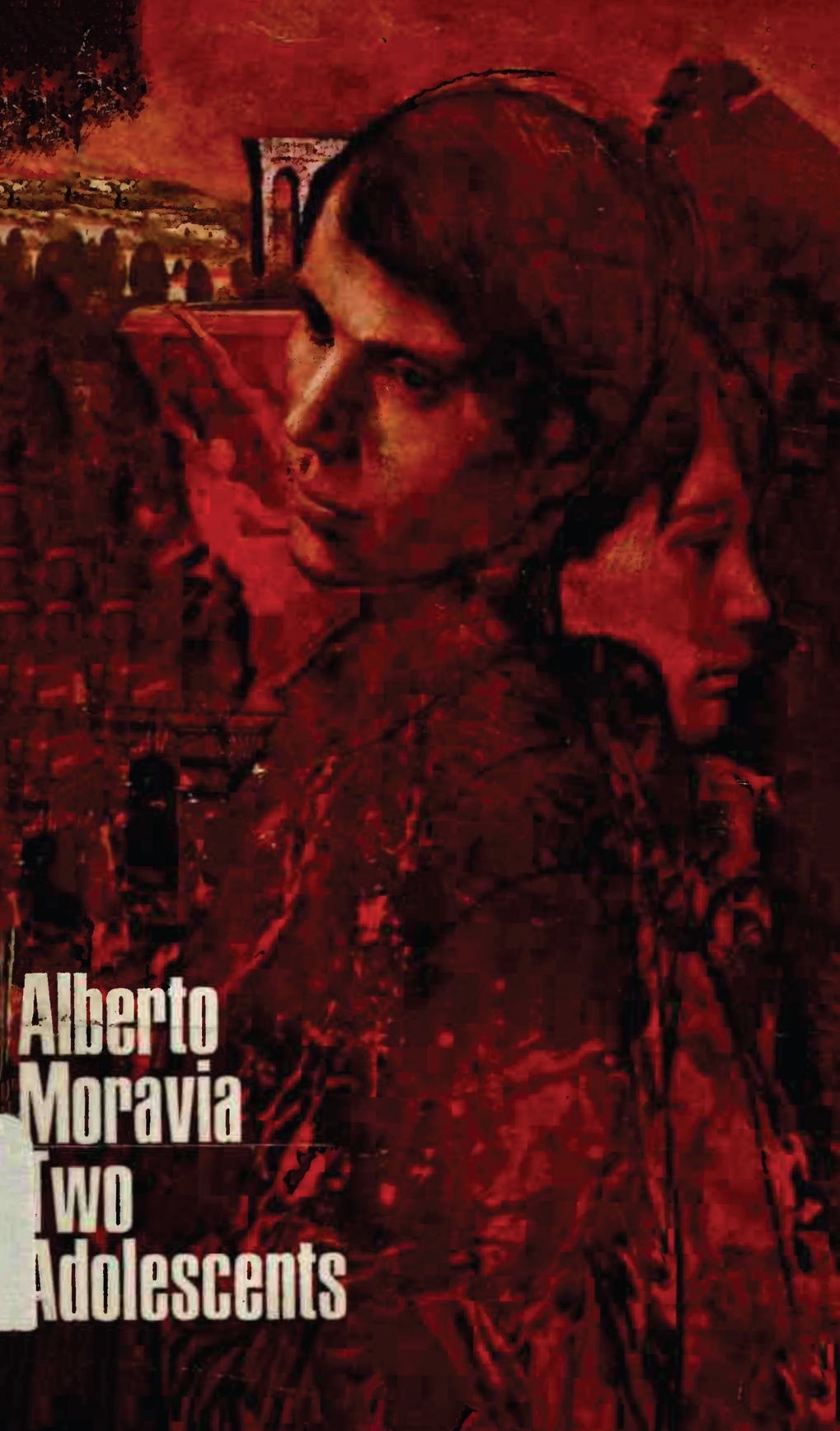
Alberto
Moravia
Two
Adolescents

TWO ADOLESCENTS

The Stories of
Agostino and Luca

ALBERTO
MORAVIA

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NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.

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AGOSTINO

Translated from the Italian
by Beryl de Zoete

DURING THOSE DAYS of early summer Agostino and his mother used to go out every morning on a bathing raft. The first few times his mother had taken a boatman, but Agostino so plainly showed his annoyance at the man's presence that from then on the oars were entrusted to him. It gave him intense pleasure to row on that calm, transparent, early morning sea; and his mother sat facing him, as gay and serene as the sea and sky, and talked to him in a soft voice, just as if he had been a man instead of a thirteen-year-old boy. Agostino's mother was a tall, beautiful woman, still in her prime, and Agostino felt a sense of pride each time he set out with her on one of those morning expeditions. It seemed to him that all the bathers on the beach were watching them, admiring his mother and envying him. In the conviction that all eyes were upon them his voice sounded to him stronger than usual, and he felt as if all his movements had something symbolic about them, as if they were part of a play; as if he and his mother, instead of being on the beach, were on a stage, under the eager eyes of hundreds of spectators. Sometimes his mother would appear in a new dress, and he could not resist remarking on it aloud, in the secret hope that others would hear. Now and again she would send him to fetch something or other from the beach cabin, while she stood waiting for him by the boat. He would obey with a secret joy, happy if he could prolong their departure even by a few minutes. At last they would get on the raft, and Agostino would take the oars and row out to sea. But for quite a long time he would remain under the disturbing influence of his filial vanity. When they were some way from the shore his mother would tell him to stop rowing, put on her rubber bathing cap, take off her sandals and slip into the water. Agostino would follow her. They swam round and

round the empty raft with its floating oars, talking gaily together, their voices ringing clear in the silence of the calm, sunlit sea. Sometimes his mother would point to a piece of cork bobbing up and down a short distance from them, and challenge him to race her to it. She gave him a few yards start, and they would swim as hard as they could toward the cork. Or they would have diving competitions from the platform of the raft, splashing up the pale, smooth water as they plunged in. Agostino would watch his mother's body sink down deeper and deeper through a froth of green bubbles; then suddenly he would dive in after her, eager to follow wherever she might go, even to the bottom of the sea. As he flung himself into the furrow his mother had made it seemed to him that even that cold, dense water must keep some trace of the passage of her beloved body. When their swim was over they would climb back onto the raft, and gazing all round her on the calm, luminous sea his mother would say: "How beautiful it is, isn't it?" Agostino made no reply, because he felt that his own enjoyment of the beauty of sea and sky was really due above all to his deep sense of union with his mother. Were it not for this intimacy, it sometimes entered his head to wonder what would remain of all that beauty. They would stay out a long time, drying themselves in the sun, which toward midday got hotter and hotter; then his mother, stretched out at full length on the platform between the two floats, with her long hair trailing in the water and her eyes closed, would fall into a doze, while Agostino would keep watch from his seat on the bench, his eyes fixed on his mother, and hardly breathing for fear of disturbing her slumber. Suddenly she would open her eyes and say what a delightful novelty it was to lie on one's back with one's eyes shut and to feel the water rocking underneath; or she would ask Agostino to pass her her cigarette case or, better still, to light one for her himself and give it to her. All of which he would do with fervent and tremulous care. While his mother smoked, Agostino would lean forward with his back to her, but with his head on one side so that he could watch the clouds of blue smoke

which indicated the spot where his mother's head was resting, with her hair spread out round her on the water. Then, as she never could have enough of the sun, she would ask Agostino to row on and not turn round, while she would take off her brassière and let down her bathing suit so as to expose her whole body to the sunlight. Agostino would go on rowing, proud of her injunction not to look as if he were being allowed to take part in a ritual. And not only did he never dream of looking around, but he felt that her body, lying so close behind him, naked in the sun, was surrounded by a halo of mystery to which he owed the greatest reverence.

One morning his mother was sitting as usual under the great beach umbrella, with Agostino beside her on the sand, waiting for the moment of their daily row. Suddenly a tall shadow fell between him and the sun. He looked up and saw a dark, sunburnt young man shaking hands with his mother. He did not pay much attention to him, thinking it was one of his mother's casual acquaintances; he only drew back a little, waiting for the conversation to be over. But the young man did not accept the invitation to sit down; pointing to the white raft in which he had come, he invited the mother to go for a row. Agostino was sure his mother would refuse this invitation as she had many previous ones; so that his surprise was great when he saw her accept at once, and immediately begin to put her things together—her sandals, bathing cap and purse, and then get up from her chair. His mother had accepted the young man's invitation with exactly the same spontaneity and simple friendliness which she would have shown toward her son; and with a like simplicity she now turned to Agostino, who sat waiting with his head down, letting the sand trickle through his fingers, and told him to have a sun bath, for she was going out for a short turn in the boat and would be back soon. The young man, meanwhile, as if quite sure of himself, had gone off in the direction of the raft, while the woman walked submissively behind him with her usual calm, majestic gait. Her son, watching them, could not help saying to himself that the young

man must now be feeling the same pride and vanity and excitement which he himself always felt when he set out in a boat with his mother. He watched her get onto the float: the young man leaned backward and pushed with his feet against the sandy bottom; then, with a few vigorous strokes, lifted the raft out of the shallow water near the shore. The young man was rowing now, and his mother sat facing him, holding onto the seat with both hands and apparently chatting with him. Gradually the raft grew smaller and smaller, till it entered the region of dazzling light which the sun shed on the surface of the water, and slowly became absorbed into it.

Left alone, Agostino stretched himself out in his mother's deck chair and with one arm behind his head lay gazing up at the sky, seemingly lost in reflection and indifferent to his surroundings. He felt that all the people on the beach must have noticed him going off every day with his mother, and therefore it could not have escaped them that today his mother had left him behind and gone off with the young man of the bathing raft. So he was determined to give no sign at all of the disappointment and disillusion which filled him with such bitterness. But however much he tried to adopt an air of calm composure, he felt at the same time that everyone must be noticing how forced and artificial his attitude was. What hurt him still more was not so much that his mother had preferred the young man's company to his as the alacrity with which she had accepted the invitation—almost as if she had anticipated it. It was as if she had decided beforehand not to lose any opportunity, and when one offered itself to accept it without hesitation. Apparently she had been bored all those times she had been alone with him on the raft, and had only gone with him for lack of something better to do. A memory came back to his mind that increased his discomfiture. It had happened at a dance to which he had been taken by his mother. A girl cousin was with them who, in despair at not being asked by anyone else, had consented to dance once or twice with him, though he was only a boy in short trousers. She had danced reluctantly and looked

very cross and out of temper, and Agostino, though preoccupied with his own steps, was aware of her contemptuous and unflattering sentiments toward himself. He had, however, asked her for a third dance, and had been quite surprised to see her suddenly smile and leap from her chair, shaking out the folds of her dress with both hands. But instead of rushing into his arms she had turned her back on him and joined a young man who had motioned to her over Agostino's shoulder. The whole scene lasted only five seconds, and no one noticed anything except Agostino himself. But he felt utterly humiliated and was sure everyone had seen how he had been snubbed.

And now, after his mother had gone off with the young man, he compared the two happenings and found them identical. Like his cousin, his mother had only waited for an opportunity to abandon him. Like his cousin, and with the same exaggerated readiness, she had accepted the first offer that presented itself. And in each case it had been his fate to come tumbling down from an illusory height and to lie bruised and wounded at the bottom.

That day his mother stayed out for about two hours. From under his big umbrella he saw her step on to the shore, shake hands with the young man and move slowly off toward the beach cabin, stooping a little under the heat of the midday sun. The beach was deserted by now, and this was a relief to Agostino, who was always convinced that all eyes were fixed on them. "What have you been doing?" his mother asked casually. "I have had great fun," began Agostino, and he made up a story of how *he* had been bathing too with the boys from the next beach cabin. But his mother was not listening; she had hurried off to dress. Agostino decided that as soon as he saw the raft appear the next day he would make some excuse to leave so as not to suffer the indignity of being left behind again. But when the next day came he had just started away when he heard his mother calling him back. "Come along," she said, as she got up and collected her belongings, "we're going out to swim." Agostino followed her, thinking that she meant to dismiss the

young man and go out alone with him. The young man was standing on the raft waiting for her. She greeted him and said simply: "I'm bringing my son, too." So Agostino, much as he disliked it, found himself sitting beside his mother facing the young man, who was rowing.

Agostino had always seen his mother in a certain light—calm, dignified and reserved. During this outing he was shocked to see the change which had taken place, not only in her manner of talking but, as it seemed, even in herself. One could scarcely believe she was the same person. They had hardly put out to sea before she made some stinging personal remark, quite lost on Agostino, which started a curious, private conversation. As far as he could make out it concerned a lady friend of the young man who had rejected his advances in favor of a rival. But this only led up to the real matter of their conversation, which seemed to be alternately insinuating, exacting, contemptuous and teasing. His mother appeared to be the more aggressive and the more susceptible of the two, for the young man contented himself with replying in a calm, ironical tone, as if he were quite sure of himself. At times his mother seemed displeased, even positively angry with the young man, and then Agostino was glad. But immediately after she would disappoint him by some flattering phrase which destroyed the illusion. Or in an offended voice she would address to the young man a string of mysterious reproaches. But instead of being offended, Agostino would see his face light up with an expression of fatuous vanity, and concluded that those reproaches were only a cover for some affectionate meaning which he was unable to fathom. As for himself, both his mother and the young man seemed to be unaware of his existence; he might as well not have been there, and his mother carried this obliviousness so far as to remind the young man that if she had gone out alone with him the day before, this was a mistake on her part which she did not intend to repeat. In the future she would bring her son with her. Agostino felt this to be decidedly insulting, as if he was something with no will of its own,

merely an object to be disposed of as her caprice or convenience might see fit.

Only once did his mother seem aware of his presence, and that was when the young man, letting go the oars for a moment, leaned forward with an intensely malicious expression on his face and murmured something in an undertone which Agostino could not understand. His mother started, pretending to be terribly shocked, and cried out, pointing to Agostino sitting by her, "Let us at least spare this innocent!" Agostino trembled with rage at hearing himself called innocent, as if a dirty rag had been thrown at him which he could not avoid.

When they were some way out from shore, the young man suggested a swim to his companion. Agostino, who had often admired the ease and simplicity with which his mother slipped into the water, was painfully struck by all the unfamiliar movements she now put into that familiar action. The young man had time to dive in and come up again to the surface, while she still stood hesitating and dipping one toe after another into the water, apparently pretending to be timid or shy. She made a great fuss about going in, laughing and protesting and holding on to the seat with both hands, till at last she dropped in an almost indecent attitude over the side and let herself fall clumsily into the arms of her companion. They dived together and came up together to the surface. Agostino, huddled on the seat, saw his mother's smiling face quite close to the young man's grave, brown one, and it seemed to him that their cheeks touched. He could see their two bodies disporting themselves in the limpid water, their hips and legs touching, and looking as if they longed to interlace with each other. Agostino looked first at them and then at the distant shore, with a shameful sense of being in the way. Catching sight of his frowning face, his mother, who was having her second dip, called up to him: "Why are you so serious? Don't you see how lovely it is in here? Goodness! what a serious son I've got"; a remark which filled Agostino with a sense of shame and humiliation. He made no reply, and contented himself with looking

elsewhere. The swim was a long one. His mother and her companion disported themselves in the water like two dolphins, and seemed to have forgotten him entirely. At last they got back onto the raft. The young man sprang on at one bound, and then leaned over the edge to assist his companion, who was calling him to help her get out of the water. Agostino saw how in raising her the young man gripped her brown flesh with his fingers, just where the arm is softest and biggest, between the shoulder and the armpit. Then she sat down beside Agostino, panting and laughing, and with her pointed nails held her wet suit away from her, so that it should not cling to her breasts. Agostino remembered that when they were alone his mother was strong enough to climb into the boat without anyone's aid, and attributed her appeal for help and her bodily postures, which seemed to draw attention to her feminine disabilities, to the new spirit which had already produced such unpleasant changes in her. Indeed, he could not help thinking that his mother, who was naturally a tall, dignified woman, resented her size as a positive drawback from which she would have liked to rid herself; and her dignity as a tiresome habit which she was trying to replace by a sort of tomboy gaucherie.

When they were both back on the raft, the return journey began. This time the oars were entrusted to Agostino, while the other two sat down on the platform which joined the two floats. He rowed gently in the burning sun, wondering constantly about the meaning of the sounds and laughter and movements of which he was conscious behind his back. From time to time his mother, as if suddenly aware of his presence, would reach up with one arm and try to stroke the back of his neck, or she would tickle him under the arm and ask if he were tired. "No, I am not tired," he replied. He heard the young man say laughingly: "Rowing's good for him," which made him plunge in the oar savagely. His mother was sitting with her head resting against his seat and her long legs stretched out; that he knew, but it seemed to him that she did not stay in that position; once, for instance, a short

skirmish seemed to be going on; his mother made a stifled sound as if she were being suffocated and the raft lurched to one side. For a moment Agostino's cheek came into contact with his mother's body, which seemed vast to him—like the sky—and pulsing with a life over which she had no control. She stood with her legs apart, holding on to her son's shoulders, and said: "I will only sit down again if you promise to be good." "I promise," rejoined the young man with mock solemnity. She let herself down again awkwardly on to the platform, and it was then her body brushed her son's cheek. The moisture of her body confined in its wet bathing suit remained on his skin, but its heat seemed to overpower its dampness and though he felt a tormenting sense of uneasiness, even of repugnance, he persisted in not drying away the traces.

As they approached the shore the young man sprang lightly to the rower's seat and seized the oars, pushing Agostino away and forcing him to take the place left empty beside his mother. She put her arm round his waist and asked how he felt, and if he was happy. She herself seemed in the highest spirits, and began singing, another most unusual thing with her. She had a sweet voice, and put in some pathetic trills which made Agostino shiver. While she sang she continued to hold him close to her, wetting him with the water from her damp bathing suit, which seemed to exude a violent animal heat. And so they came in to the shore, the young man rowing, the woman singing and caressing her son, who submitted with a feeling of utter boredom; making up a picture which Agostino felt to be false, and contrived for appearance' sake.

Next day the young man appeared again. Agostino's mother insisted on her son coming and the scenes of the day before repeated themselves. Then after a few days' interval they went out again. And at last, with their apparently growing intimacy, he came to fetch her daily, and each time Agostino was obliged to go too, to listen to their conversation and to watch them bathing. He hated these expeditions, and invented a thousand reasons for not going. He would disappear and not show himself till his mother, having called

him repeatedly and hunted for him everywhere, succeeded at last in unearthing him; but then he came less in response to her appeals than because her disappointment and vexation aroused his pity. He kept completely silent on the float, hoping they would understand and leave him alone, but in the end he proved weaker and more susceptible to pity than his mother or the young man. It was enough for them just to have him there; as for his feelings, he came to see that they counted for less than nothing. So, in spite of all his attempts to escape, the expeditions continued.

ONE DAY AGOSTINO WAS SITTING on the sand behind his mother's deck chair, waiting for the white raft to appear on the sea and for his mother to wave her hand in greeting and call to the young man by name. But the usual hour for his appearance passed, and his mother's disappointed and cross expression clearly showed that she had given up all hope of his coming. Agostino had often wondered what he should feel in such a case, and had supposed that his joy would have been at least as great as his mother's disappointment. But he was surprised to feel instead a vague disappointment, and he realized that the humiliations and resentments of those daily outings had become almost a necessity of life to him. Therefore, with a confused and unconscious desire to inflict pain on his mother, he asked her more than once if they were not going out for their usual row. She replied each time that she didn't know, but that probably they wouldn't be going today. She lay in the deck chair with a book open in her lap, but she wasn't reading and her eyes continually wandered out to sea, as if seeking some particular object among the many boats and bathers with which the water was already swarming. After sitting a long time behind his mother's chair, drawing patterns in the sand, Agostino came round to her and said in a tone of voice which he felt to be teasing and even

mocking: "Mamma, do you mean to say that we're not going out on the raft today?" His mother may have felt the mockery in his voice and the desire to make her suffer, or his few rash words may have sufficed to release her long pent-up irritation. She raised her hand with an involuntary gesture and gave him a sharp slap on the cheek, which did not really hurt, probably because she regretted it almost before the blow fell. Agostino said nothing, but leaping up off the sand in one bound, he went away with his head hanging down, in the direction of the beach cabin. "Agostino! . . . Agostino! . . ." he heard his name called several times. Then the calling stopped, and looking back he fancied he saw among the throng of boats the young man's white raft. But he no longer worried about that, he was like someone who has found a treasure and hastens to hide it away so that he may examine it alone. For it was with just such a sense of discovery that he ran away to nurse his injury; something so novel to him as to seem almost incredible.

His cheek burned, his eyes were full of tears which he could not keep back; and fearing lest his sobs should break out before he got into shelter, he ran doubled up. The accumulated bitterness of all those days when he had been compelled to accompany the young man and his mother came surging back on him, and he felt if only he could have a good cry it would release something in him and help him to understand the meaning of all these strange happenings. The simplest thing seemed to be to shut himself up in the beach cabin. His mother was probably already out in the boat and no one would disturb him. Agostino climbed the steps hurriedly, opened the door and, leaving it ajar, sat down on a stool in the corner.

He huddled up with his knees tucked into his chest and his head against the wall, and holding his face between his hands, started weeping conscientiously. The slap he had received kept rising up before him, and he wondered why, when it seemed so hard, his mother's hand had been so soft and irresolute. With the bitter sense of humiliation aroused in him by the blow were mixed a thousand other sensations, even

more disagreeable, which had wounded his feelings during these last days. There was one above all which kept returning to his mind: the image of his mother's body in its damp tricot pressed against his cheek, quivering with a sort of imperious vitality. And just as great clouds of dust fly out from old clothes when they are beaten, so, as the result of that blow to his suffering and bewildered consciousness, there arose in him again the sensation of his mother's body pressed against his cheek. Indeed, that sensation seemed at times to take the place of the slap; at others, the two became so mixed that he felt both the throbbing of her body and the burning blow. But while it seemed to him natural that the slap on his cheek should keep flaring up like a fire which is gradually going out, he could not understand why the earlier sensation so persistently recurred. Why, among so many others, was it just that one which haunted him? He could not have explained it, but he thought that as long as he lived he would only have to carry his memory back to that moment in his life in order to have fresh against his cheek the pulse of her body and the rough texture of the damp tricot.

He went on crying softly to himself so as not to interrupt the painful workings of his memory, at the same time rubbing away from his wet skin with the tips of his fingers the tears which continued to fall slowly but uninterruptedly from his eyes. It was dark and stuffy in the cabin. Suddenly he had a feeling of someone opening the door, and he almost hoped that his mother, repenting of what she had done, would lay her hand affectionately on his shoulder and turn his face toward her. And his lips had already begun to shape the word "Mamma" when he heard a step in the cabin and the door pulled to, without any hand touching his shoulder or stroking his head.

He raised his head and looked up. Close to the half-open door he saw a boy of about his own age standing in an attitude of someone on the lookout. He had on a pair of short trousers rolled up at the bottom, and an open sailor blouse with a great hole in the back. A thin ray of sunshine falling through a gap in the roof

of the cabin lit up the thick growth of auburn curls round his neck. His feet were bare; holding the door ajar with his hands, he was gazing intently at something on the beach and did not seem to be aware of Agostino's presence. Agostino dried his eyes with the back of his hand and said: "Hello, what do you want?" The boy turned around, making a sign not to speak. He had an ugly, freckled face, the most remarkable feature of which was the rapid movement of his hard blue eyes. Agostino thought he recognized him. Probably he was the son of a fisherman or beach attendant, and he had doubtless seen him pushing out the boats or doing something about the beach.

"We're playing cops and robbers," said the boy, after a moment, turning to Agostino. "They mustn't see me."

"Which are you?" asked Agostino, hastily drying his eyes.

"A robber, of course," replied the other without looking around.

Agostino went on watching the boy. He couldn't make up his mind whether he liked him, but his voice had a rough touch of dialect which piqued him and aroused his curiosity. Besides, he felt instinctively that this boy's hiding in the cabin just at that moment was an opportunity—he could not have explained of what sort—but certainly an opportunity he must not miss.

"Will you let me play too?" he asked. The boy turned round and stared at him rudely. "How do you get into it?" he said quickly. "We're all pals playing together."

"Well," said Agostino, with shameless persistence, "let me play too."

The boy shrugged his shoulders. "It's too late now. We've almost finished the game."

"Well, in the next game."

"There won't be any more," said the boy, looking him over doubtfully, but as if struck by his persistence. "Afterwards we're going to the pine woods."

"I'll go with you, if you'll let me."

The boy seemed amused and began to laugh rather contemptuously. "You're a fine one, you are. But we don't want you."

Agostino had never been in such a position before. But the same instinct which prompted him to ask the boy if he might join their game suggested to him now a means by which he might make himself acceptable.

"Look here," he said hesitatingly, "if you . . . if you'll let me join your gang, I . . . I'll give you something."

The other turned round at once with greedy eyes.

"What'll you give me?"

"Whatever you like."

Agostino pointed to a big model of a sailboat, with all its sails attached, which was lying on the floor of the cabin among a lot of other toys.

"I'll give you that."

"What use is that to me?" replied the boy, shrugging his shoulders.

"You could sell it," Agostino suggested.

"They'd never take it," said the boy, with the air of one who knows. "They'd say it was stolen goods."

Agostino looked all round him despairingly. His mother's clothes were hanging on pegs, her shoes were on the floor, on the table was a handkerchief and a scarf or two. There was absolutely nothing in the cabin which seemed a suitable offering.

"Say," said the boy, seeing his bewilderment, "got any cigarettes?"

Agostino remembered that that very morning his mother had put two boxes of a very good brand in the big bag which was hanging from a peg; and he hastened to reply, triumphantly, "Yes, I have. Would you like some?"

"I *don't* think!" said the other, with scornful irony. "Are you stupid! Give them here, quick."

Agostino took down the bag, felt about in it and pulled out the two boxes. He held them out to the boy, as if he were not quite sure how many he wanted.

"I'll take both," he said lightly, seizing the boxes. He looked at the label and clicked his tongue approvingly and said: "You must be rich, eh?"

Agostino didn't know what to answer. The boy went on: "I'm Berto. What's your name?"

Agostino told him. But the other had ceased to pay any attention. His impatient fingers had already torn

open one of the boxes, breaking the seals on its paper wrapping. He took out a cigarette and put it between his lips. Then he took a match from his pocket and struck it against the wall of the cabin; and after inhaling a mouthful of smoke and puffing it out through his nose, he resumed his watching position at the crack of the door.

"Come on, let's go," he said, after a moment, making Agostino a sign to follow him. They left the cabin one behind the other. When they got to the beach Berto made straight for the road behind the row of beach cabins.

As they walked along the burning sand between the low bushes of broom and thistles, he said: "Now we're going to the Cave . . . they've gone on past . . . they're looking for me lower down."

"Where is the Cave?" asked Agostino.

"At the Vespucci Baths," replied the boy. He held his cigarette ostentatiously between two fingers, as if to display it, and voluptuously inhaled great mouthfuls of smoke. "Don't you smoke?" he said.

"I don't care about it," said Agostino, ashamed to confess that he had never even dreamed of smoking. But Berto laughed. "Why don't you say straight out that your mother won't let you? Speak the truth." His way of saying this was contemptuous rather than friendly. He offered Agostino a cigarette, saying: "Go ahead, you smoke too."

They had reached the sea-front and were walking barefoot on the sharp flints between dried-up flower beds. Agostino put the cigarette to his lips and took a few puffs, inhaling a little smoke which he at once let out again instead of swallowing it.

Berto laughed derisively.

"You call that smoking!" he exclaimed. "That's not the way to do it. Look." He took the cigarette and inhaled deeply, rolling his sulky eyes all the while; then he opened his mouth wide and put it quite close to Agostino's eyes. There was nothing to be seen in his mouth, except his tongue curled up at the back.

"Now watch," said Berto, shutting his mouth again. And he puffed a cloud of smoke straight into Ago-

stino's face. Agostino coughed and laughed nervously at the same time. "It's your turn now," said Berto.

A trolley passed them, whistling, its window curtains flapping in the breeze. Agostino inhaled a fresh mouthful and with a great effort swallowed the smoke. But it went the wrong way and he had a dreadful fit of coughing. Berto took the cigarette and gave him a great slap on the back, saying: "Bravo! There's no doubt about your being a smoker."

After this experiment they walked on in silence past a whole series of bath establishments, with their rows of cabins painted in bright colors, great striped umbrellas slanting in all directions, and absurd triumphal arches. The beach between the cabins was packed with noisy holiday-makers and the sparkling sea swarmed with bathers.

"Where is Vespucci?" asked Agostino, who had to walk very fast to keep up with his new friend.

"It's the last one of all."

Agostino began to wonder whether he ought not to turn back. If his mother hadn't gone out on the raft after all, she would certainly be looking for him. But the memory of that slap put his scruples to rest. In going with Berto he almost felt as if he were pursuing a mysterious and justified vendetta.

Suddenly Berto stopped and said: "How about letting the smoke out through your nose? Can you do that?" Agostino shook his head, and his companion, holding the stump of his cigarette between his lips, inhaled the smoke and expelled it through his nostrils. "Now," he went on, "I'm going to let it out through my eyes. But you must put your hand on my chest and look me straight in the face." Agostino went up to him quite innocently and put his hand on Berto's chest and fixed his eyes on Berto's, expecting to see smoke come out of them.

But Berto treacherously pressed the lighted cigarette down hard on the back of his hand and threw the butt away, jumping for joy and shouting: "Oh! you silly idiot! You just don't know anything." Agostino was almost blind with pain, and his first impulse was to fling himself on Berto and strike him. But Berto, as if

he saw what was coming, stood still and clenched his fists, and with two sharp blows in the stomach almost knocked the breath out of Agostino's body.

"I'm not one for words," he said savagely. "If you ask for it you'll get it." Agostino, infuriated, rushed at him again, but he felt terribly weak and certain of being defeated. This time Berto seized him by the head, and taking it under his arm almost strangled him. Agostino did not even attempt to resist, but in a stifled voice implored him to let go. Berto released him and sprang back, planting his feet firmly on the ground in a fighting stance. But Agostino had heard the vertebrae of his neck crack, and was stupefied by the boy's extraordinary brutality. It seemed incredible that he, Agostino, who had always been kind to everyone, should suddenly be treated with such savage and deliberate cruelty. His chief feeling was one of amazement at such barbarousness. It overwhelmed him, but at the same time fascinated him because of its very novelty and because it was so monstrous.

"I haven't done you any harm," he panted, "I gave you those cigarettes . . . and you . . ." He couldn't finish. His eyes filled with tears.

"Uh, you crybaby," retorted Berto. "Want your cigarettes back? I don't want them. Take them back to Mamma."

"It doesn't matter," said Agostino, shaking his head disconsolately. "I only just said it for something to say. Please keep them."

"Well, let's get on," said Berto. "We're almost there."

The burn on Agostino's hand was hurting him badly. Raising it to his lips he looked about him. On that part of the beach there were very few cabins, five or six in all, scattered about at some distance from each other. They were miserable huts of rough wood. The sand between them was deserted and the sea was equally empty. There were a few women in the shade of a boat pulled up out of reach of the tide, some standing, some lying stretched out on the sand, all dressed in antiquated bathing suits, with long drawers edged with white braid, all busy drying themselves and exposing their white limbs to the sun. A signboard

painted blue bore the inscription: "Amerigo Vespucci Baths." A low green shack half-buried in the sand evidently belonged to the bath man. Beyond this the shore stretched away as far as the eye could see, without either cabins or houses, a solitude of wind-swept sand between the sparkling blue sea and the dusty green of the pine trees.

One entire side of the man's hut was hidden from the road by sand dunes, which were higher at this point. Then, when you had climbed to the top of the dunes, you saw a patched, faded awning of rusty red, which seemed to have been cut out of an old sail. This awning was attached at one end to two poles driven into the sand, and at the other to the hut.

"That's our cave," said Berto.

Under the awning a man seated at a rickety table was in the act of lighting a cigarette. Two or three boys were stretched on the sand around him. Berto took a flying leap and landed at the man's feet, crying: "Cave!" Agostino approached rather timidly. "This is Pisa," said Berto, pointing to him. He was surprised to hear himself called by this nickname so soon. It was only five minutes ago that he had told Berto he was born at Pisa. Agostino lay down on the ground beside the others. The sand was not so clean as it was on the beach; bits of coconut shell and wooden splinters, fragments of earthenware and all sorts of rubbish were mixed up in it. Here and there it was caked and hard from the pails of dirty water which had been thrown out of the hut. Agostino noticed that the boys, four in all, were poorly dressed. Like Berto they were evidently the sons of sailors or bath men. "He was at the Speranza," burst out Berto, without drawing breath. "He says he wants to play at cops and robbers too, but the game's over, isn't it? I told you the game would be over."

At that moment there was a cry of "It's not fair! It's not fair!" Agostino, looking up, saw another gang of boys running from the direction of the sea, probably the cops. First came a thickset, stumpy youth of about seventeen in a bathing costume; next, to his great surprise, a Negro; the third was fair, and by his

carriage and physical beauty struck Agostino as being better bred than the others. But as he got nearer, his ragged bathing suit, full of holes, and a certain coarseness in his handsome face with beautiful blue eyes, showed that he too belonged to the people. After these three boys came four more, all about the same age, between thirteen and fourteen. The big, thickset boy was so much older than the others that at first it seemed odd that he should mix with such children. But his pasty face, the color of half-baked bread; the thick, expressionless features, and an almost brutish stupidity were sufficient explanation of the company he kept. He had hardly any neck, and his smooth, hairless torso was as wide at the waist and hips as at the shoulders. "You hid in a cabin," he shouted at Berto. "I dare you to deny it! Cabins are out of bounds by the rules of the game."

"It's a lie!" retorted Berto, with equal violence. "Isn't it, Pisa?" he added, suddenly turning to Agostino. "I didn't hide in a cabin, did I? We were both standing by the hut of the Speranza, and we saw you go by, didn't we, Pisa?"

"You did hide in my cabin, you know," said Agostino, who was incapable of telling a lie. "There, you see!" shouted the other, brandishing his fist under Berto's nose. "I'll bash your head in, you liar!"

"Spy!" yelled Berto in Agostino's face. "I told you to stay where you were. Go back to Mamma, that's the place for you." He was filled with uncontrollable rage, a bestial fury which amazed and mystified Agostino. But in springing to punish him one of the cigarette boxes tumbled out of his pocket. He stooped to pick it up, but the big boy was quicker still, and darting down he pounced on the box and waved it in the air, crying triumphantly: "Cigarettes! Cigarettes!"

"Give them back," shouted Berto, hurling himself upon the big boy. "They're mine. Pisa gave them to *me*. You just give them back."

The other took a step back and waited till Berto was within range. Then he held the box of cigarettes in his mouth and began to pummel Berto's stomach methodically with his two fists. Finally he kicked Berto's feet

from under and brought him down with a crash. "Give me them back!" Berto went on shouting, while he rolled in the sand. But the big boy, with a stupid laugh, called out: "He's got some more ... at him, boys." And with a unanimity which surprised Agostino all the boys flung themselves upon Berto. For a moment there was nothing to be seen but a writhing mass of bodies tangled together in a cloud of sand at the feet of the man, who went on smoking calmly at the table. At last, the fair boy, who seemed to be the most agile, disentangled himself from the heap and got up, triumphantly waving the second box of cigarettes. Then the others got up, one by one; and last of all Berto. His ugly, freckled little face was convulsed with fury. "Swine! Thieves!" he bellowed, shaking his fist and sobbing.

It was a strange and novel impression for Agostino to see his tormentor tormented in his turn, and treated as pitilessly as he himself had just been. "Swine! Swine!" Berto screamed again. The big boy went up to him and gave him a resounding box on the ear, which made his companions dance for joy. "Do you want any more?" Berto rushed like a mad one to the corner of the hut and, bending down, grabbed hold of a large rock with both hands and flung it at his enemy, who with a derisive whistle sprang aside to avoid it. "You swine!" yelled Berto again, still sobbing with rage, but withdrawing himself prudently behind a corner of the hut. His sobs were loud and furious, as if giving vent to some frightful bitterness, but his companions had ceased to take any interest in him. They were all stretched out again on the sand. The big boy opened one box of cigarettes, and the fair boy another. Suddenly the man, who had remained seated at the little table without moving during the fight, said: "Hand over those cigarettes."

Agostino looked at him. He was a tall, fat man of about fifty. He had a cold and deceptively good-natured face. He was bald, with a curious saddle-shaped forehead and twinkling eyes; a red, aquiline nose with wide nostrils full of little scarlet veins horrible to look at. He had a drooping mustache,

which hid a rather crooked mouth, and a cigar between his lips. He was wearing a faded shirt and a pair of blue cotton trousers with one leg down to his ankle and the other rolled up below his knee. A black sash was wound round his stomach. One detail in particular added to Agostino's first feeling of revulsion, the fact that Saro—for this was his name—had six fingers instead of five on both hands. This made them look enormous, and his fingers like abbreviated tentacles. Agostino could not take his eyes off those hands; he could not make up his mind whether Saro had two first or two middle or two third fingers. They all seemed of equal length, except the little finger, which stuck out from his hand like a small branch at the base of a knotty tree trunk. Saro took the cigar out of his mouth and repeated simply: "What about those cigarettes?"

The fair boy got up and put his box on the table. "Good for you, Sandro," said Saro.

"And supposing I won't give you them?" shouted the elder boy defiantly.

"Give them up, Tortima; you'd better," called out several voices at once. Tortima looked all round and then at Saro, who with the six fingers of his right hand on the box of cigarettes, kept his half-closed little eyes fixed on him. Then, with the remark: "All right, but it isn't fair," he came over and put his box down on the table too.

"And now I'll divide them," said Saro, in a soft, affable voice. Without removing his cigar, he screwed up his eyes, opened one of the boxes, took out a cigarette with his stumpy, multiple fingers, which looked incapable of gripping it, and threw it to the Negro, with a "Catch, Homs!" Then he took another and threw it to one of the others; a third he threw into the joined palms of Sandro; a fourth straight at Tortima's stolid face—and so with all the rest. "Do you want one?" he asked Berto, who, swallowing back his sobs, had come silently back to join the others. He nodded sulkily, and was thrown one. When each of the boys had received his cigarette, Saro was about to shut the box, which was still half-full, when he stopped

and said to Agostino: "What about you, Pisa?" Agostino would have liked to refuse, but Berto gave him a dig in the ribs and whispered: "Ask for one, idiot, we'll smoke it together afterward." So Agostino said he would like one, and he too had his cigarette. Then Saro shut the box.

"What about the rest? What about the rest?" shouted all the boys at once.

"You shall have the rest another day," replied Saro calmly. "Pisa, take these cigarettes and go and put them in the hut." There was complete silence. Agostino nervously took both boxes and, stepping over the boys' prostrate bodies, crossed to the shed. It appeared to consist of one room only, and he liked its smallness, which made it seem like a house in a fairy tale. It had a low ceiling with whitewashed beams, and the walls were of unplaned planks. Two tiny windows, complete with window sill, little square panes of glass, latches, curtains, even a vase or two of flowers, diffused a mild light. One corner was occupied by the bed, neatly made up, with a clean pillowcase and red counterpane; in another stood a round table and three stools. On the marble top of a big chest stood two of those bottles which have sailboats or steamships imprisoned inside them. Sails were hung on hooks all round the walls, and there were pairs of oars and other sea tackle. Agostino thought how he should love to own a cottage as cosy and convenient as this. He went up to the table, on which lay a big, cracked china bowl full of half-smoked cigarettes, put down his two boxes and went out again into the sunlight.

All the boys were lying face downward on the sand around Saro, smoking with great demonstrations of enjoyment. And meanwhile they were discussing something about which they did not seem to agree. Sandro was just saying: "I tell you it *is* him."

"His mother's a real beauty," said an admiring voice. "She's the best looker on the beach. Homs and me got under the cabin one day to see her undress, but her chemise fell just above the crack we were looking through and we couldn't see anything at all. Her legs, gee, and her breasts. . . ."

"You never see the husband anywhere about," said a third voice.

"You needn't worry, she satisfies herself.... D'you know who with? That young guy from Villa Sorriso ... the dark one. He takes her out every day on his raft."

"He's not the only one either. She'd take anyone on," said someone maliciously.

"But I know it's not him," insisted another.

"Say, Pisa," said Sandro suddenly. "Isn't that your mother, that lady at the Speranza? She's tall and dark, with long legs, and wears a striped two-piece bathing suit ... and she's got a mole on the left side of her mouth."

"Yes, why?" asked Agostino, nervously.

"It *is* her, it *is* her," cried Berto triumphantly. And then, in a burst of jealous spite: "You're just their blind, aren't you? You all go out together, her and you, and her gigolo. You're their blind, aren't you?" At these words everyone roared with laughter. Even Saro smiled under his mustache. "I don't know what you mean," said Agostino, blushing and only half-understanding. He wanted to protest, but their coarse jokes aroused in him a curious and unexpected sense of sadistic satisfaction. As if by their words the boys had, all unawares, avenged the humiliations which his mother had inflicted on him all these days past. At the same time he was struck dumb with horror at their knowing so much about his private affairs.

"Innocent little lamb," said the same malicious voice. "I'd like to know what they're up to; they always go a long way out," said Tortima with mock gravity. "Come on, tell us what they do. He kisses her, eh?" He put the back of his hand to his lips and gave it a smacking kiss.

"It's quite true," said Agostino, flushing with shame; "we do go a long way out to swim."

"Oh yes, to swim!" came sarcastically from several voices at once.

"My mother does swim, and so does Renzo."

"Ah, yes, Renzo, that's his name," affirmed the boy,

as if recovering a lost thread in his memory. "Renzo, that tall dark fellow."

"And what do Renzo and Mamma do together?" suddenly asked Berto, quite restored. "Is it this they do?" and he made an expressive gesture with his hand, "And you just look on, eh?"

"I?" questioned Agostino, turning around with a look of terror.

They all burst out laughing and smothered their merriment in the sand. But Saro continued to observe him attentively, without moving. Agostino looked around despairingly, as if to implore aid.

Saro seemed to be struck by his look. He took his cigar out of his mouth, and said: "Can't you see he knows absolutely nothing?"

The din was immediately silenced. "How do you mean, he doesn't know?" asked Tortima, who hadn't understood.

"He just doesn't know," repeated Saro, simply. And turning to Agostino, he said in a softer voice: "Speak up, Pisa. A man and woman, what is it they do together? Don't you know?"

They all listened breathlessly. Agostino stared at Saro, who continued to smoke and watch him through half-closed eyelids. He looked round at the boys, who were evidently bursting with stifled laughter, and repeated mechanically, through the cloud which seemed to cover his sight: "A man and a woman?"

"Yes, your mother and Renzo," explained Berto brutally.

Agostino wanted to say "Don't talk about my mother," but the question awoke in him a whole swarm of sensations and memories, and he was too upset to say anything at all. "He doesn't know," said Saro abruptly, shifting his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "Which of you boys is going to tell him?" Agostino looked around bewildered. It was like being at school, but what a strange schoolmaster! What odd schoolfellows! "Me, me, me! . . ." all the boys shouted at once. Saro's glance rested dubiously on all those faces burning with eagerness to be the first to speak. Then he said: "You don't really know

either, any of you. You've only got it from hearsay.... Let someone tell him who really knows." Agostino saw them all eyeing each other in silence. Then someone said: "Tortima." An expression of vanity lit up the youth's face. He was just going to get up when Berto said, with hatred in his voice: "He made it all up, himself.... It's a pack of lies...."

"What d'you mean, a pack of lies?" shouted Tortima, flinging himself upon Berto. "It's you who tells lies, you bastard!" But this time Berto was too quick for him, and from behind the corner of the hut he began making faces and putting out his tongue at Tortima, his red, freckled face distorted by hatred. Tortima contented himself with threatening him with his fist and shouting: "You dare come back!" But somehow Berto's intervention had wrecked his chances, and the boys with one accord voted for Sandro. His arms crossed over his broad brown chest on which shone a few golden hairs, Sandro, handsome and elegant, advanced into the circle of boys stretched out on the sand. Agostino noticed that his strong, bronzed legs looked as if they were dusted over with gold. A few hairs also showed through the gaps in his bathing trunks. "It's quite simple," he said in a strong, clear voice. And speaking slowly with the aid of gestures which were significant without being coarse, he explained to Agostino what he now felt he had always known but had somehow forgotten, as in a deep sleep. Sandro's explanation was followed by other less sober ones. Some of the boys made vulgar gestures with their hands, others dinned into Agostino's ears coarse words which he had never heard before; two of them said: "We'll show him what they do," and gave a demonstration on the hot sand, jerking and writhing in each other's arms. Sandro, satisfied with his success, went off alone to finish his cigar. "Do you understand now?" asked Saro, as soon as the din had died down. Agostino nodded. In reality he hadn't so much understood as absorbed the notion, rather as one absorbs a medicine or poison, the effect of which is not immediately felt but will be sure to manifest itself later on. The idea was not in his empty, bewildered

and anguished mind, but in some other part of his being; in his embittered heart, or deep in his breast, which received it with amazement. It was like some bright, dazzling object, which one cannot look at for the radiance it emits, so that one can only guess its real shape. He felt it was something he had always possessed but only now experienced in his blood.

"Renzo and Pisa's mother," he heard someone say close beside him. "I'll be Renzo and you be Pisa's mother. Let's try." He turned suddenly and saw Berto, who with an awkward, ceremonious gesture was making a bow to another boy. "Madam, may I have the honor of your company on my raft? I'm going for a swim. Pisa will accompany us." Then suddenly blind rage took possession of him and flinging himself upon Berto he yelled: "I forbid you to talk about my mother." But before he knew what had happened he was lying on his back on the sand, with Berto's knee holding him down and Berto's fists raining blows on his face. He wanted to cry, but realizing that his tears would only be an opening for more jeers, he controlled them with great effort. Then, covering his face with his arm, he lay as still as death. Berto left him alone after a bit, and feeling very ill-treated he went and sat down at Saro's feet. The boys were already busy talking about something else. One of them suddenly asked Agostino: "Are you rich, you people?"

Agostino was so intimidated that he hardly knew what to say. But he replied: "I think so."

"How much? . . . A million? Two millions? . . . Three millions?"

"I don't know," said Agostino, feeling bothered.

"Got a big house?"

"Yes," said Agostino; and somewhat reassured by the more courteous turn of the conversation, pride of possession prompted him to add: "We have twenty rooms."

"Bum . . ." came incredulously from someone.

"We've got two reception rooms and then there's my father's study . . ."

"Aha!" said a scornful voice.

"Or it *used* to be my father's," Agostino hastened to

add, half-hoping that this detail might make them feel a little more sympathetic towards him. "My father is dead."

There was a moment's silence. "So your mother's a widow?" said Tortima.

"Well, of course," came from several mocking voices. "That's not saying anything," protested Tortima. "She might have married again."

"No, she hasn't married again," said Agostino.

"And have you got a car?"

"Yes."

"And a chauffeur?"

"Yes."

"Tell your mother I'm ready to be her chauffeur," shouted someone.

"And what do you do in those reception rooms?" asked Tortima, on whom Agostino's account seemed to make more impression than on anyone else. "Do you give dances?"

"Yes, my mother has receptions," replied Agostino.

"Lots of pretty women, you bet," said Tortima, as if speaking to himself. "How many people come?"

"I don't really know."

"How many?"

"Twenty or thirty," said Agostino, who by now felt quite at his ease and was rather gratified by his success.

"Twenty or thirty . . . What do they do?"

"What do you expect them to do?" asked Berto ironically. "I suppose they dance and amuse themselves. They're rich . . . not like us. They make love, I suppose."

"No, they don't make love," said Agostino conscientiously, for the sake of showing that he knew perfectly well what they meant.

Tortima seemed to be struggling with an idea which he was unable to formulate. At last he said: "But supposing I was to appear at one of those receptions, and say: 'I've come too.' What would you do?" As he spoke he got up and marched forward impudently, with his hands on his hips and his chest stuck out. The boys burst out laughing. "I should ask you to go

away," said Agostino simply, emboldened by the laughter of the boys.

"And supposing I refused to go away?"

"I should make our men turn you out."

"Have you got menservants?"

"No, but my mother hires waiters when she has a reception."

"Bah, just like your father." One of the boys was evidently the son of a waiter.

"And supposing I resisted, and broke that waiter's nose for him, and then marched into the middle of the room and shouted, 'You're a lot of rogues and bitches, the whole lot of you.' What would you say?" insisted Tortima, advancing threateningly upon Agostino, and turning his fist round and round, as if to let him smell it. But this time they all turned against Tortima, not so much from a wish to protect Agostino as from the desire to hear more details of his fabulous wealth.

"Leave him alone . . . they'd kick you out, and a good thing too," was heard on all sides. Berto said sneeringly: "What have you got to do with it? Your father's a boatman and you'll be a boatman too; and if you did turn up at Pisa's house you certainly wouldn't shout anything. I can see you," he added, getting up and mimicking Tortima's supposed humility in Agostino's house . . . "Excuse me, is Mr. Pisa at home? Excuse me . . . I just came . . . Oh, he can't? . . . Never mind, please excuse me . . . I'm so sorry . . . I'll come another time. Oh, I can see you. Why, you'd bow down to the ground."

All the boys burst out laughing. Tortima, who was as stupid as he was brutal, didn't dare stand up to their taunts. But in order to get even he said to Agostino: "Can you make an iron arm?"

"An iron arm?" repeated Agostino.

"He don't know what an iron arm is," said several voices, derisively. Sandro came over and took hold of Agostino's arm and doubled it up, and told him to stay with his hand in the air and his elbow in the sand. Meanwhile Tortima lay face downward on the sand and placed his arm in a similar position. "You push

from one side," said Sandro, "and Tortima will push from the other."

Agostino took Tortima's hand. The latter at one stroke brought down his arm and got up triumphantly.

"Let me try," said Berto. He brought down Agostino's arm just as easily and got up in his turn. "Me too, me too!" cried all the others. One after another they all beat Agostino. At last it was the Negro's turn, and someone said: "If you let Homs beat you, well, your arm must be made of putty." Agostino made up his mind not to let the Negro beat him.

The Negro's arms were thin, the color of roasted coffee. He thought his own looked stronger. "Come on, Pisa," said Homs, with sham bravado, as he lay down facing him. He had a weak voice, like a woman's, and when he brought his face to within an inch of Agostino's, he saw that his nose, instead of being flat, as you might have expected, was almost aquiline, and curved in on itself like a black, shiny curl of flesh, with a pale, almost yellow mole above one nostril. Nor were his lips broad and thick like a Negro's, but thin and violet-colored. He had round eyes with large whites, on which his protuberant forehead with its great mop of sooty wool seemed to press. "Come on, Pisa, I won't hurt you," he said, putting his delicate hand with its thin, rose-nailed fingers in Agostino's. Agostino saw that by raising himself slightly on his shoulder he could easily have brought his whole weight to bear on his hand, and this simple fact allowed him at first to keep Homs under his control. For quite a while they competed without either of them getting the upper hand, surrounded by a circle of admiring boys. Agostino's face wore a look of great concentration; he was putting his whole strength into the effort; whereas the Negro made fearful grimaces, grinding his white teeth and screwing up his eyes. Suddenly a surprised voice proclaimed: "Pisa's winning!" But at that very moment Agostino felt an excruciating pain running from his shoulder right down his arm; he could bear no more, and gave in, saying: "No, he's stronger than me." "You'll beat me next

time," said the Negro, in an unpleasantly honeyed voice, as he rose from the ground. "Fancy Homs beating you too, you're good for nothing," sneered Tortima. But the other boys seemed tired of ragging Agostino. "How about a swim?" said someone. "Yes, yes, a swim!" they all cried, and they set off by leaps and bounds over the hot sand to the sea. Agostino, trailing behind, saw them turning somersaults like fish into the shallow water, with shouts and screams of joy. As he reached the water's edge Tortima emerged, bottom first, like a huge sea-animal, and called out: "Dive in, Pisa. What are you doing?"

"But I'm dressed," said Agostino.

"Get undressed then," returned Tortima crossly. Agostino tried to escape, but it was too late. Tortima caught hold of him and dragged him along, struggling and pulling his tormentor over with him. He only let him go when he had almost suffocated him by holding his head under water. Then with a "Good-bye, Pisa," he swam off. Some way out Agostino could see Sandro standing in an elegant posture on a raft, in the middle of a swarm of boys, all trying to climb on to the floats. Wet and panting he returned to the beach and stood a few moments watching the raft going further and further out to sea, all alone under the blinding sunshine. Then hurrying along the burnished sand at the water's edge, he made his way back to the Speranza.

IT WAS NOT SO LATE as he feared. When he reached the bathing place he found that his mother had not yet returned. The beach was emptying; only a few isolated bathers still loitered in the dazzling water. The majority were trailing languidly off in single file under the midday sun up the tiled path which led from the beach. Agostino sat down under the big umbrella and waited. He thought his mother was staying out an unusually long time. He forgot that the young man had arrived much later than usual with his raft and that it

was not his mother who had wanted to go out alone, but he who had disappeared; and said to himself that those two had certainly profited by his absence to do what Saro and the boys had suggested. He no longer felt any jealousy about this, but experienced a new and strange quiver of curiosity and secret approval, as if he were himself an accomplice. It was quite natural for his mother to behave like that with the young man, to go out with him every day on the float, and at a safe distance from prying eyes to fling herself into his arms. It was natural, and he was now perfectly well able to accept the fact. These thoughts passed through his mind as he sat scanning the sea for the return of the lovers. At length the raft appeared, a bright speck on the sea, and as it drew rapidly nearer he could see his mother sitting on the bench and the young man rowing. Every stroke of the oars as they rose and fell left a glittering track in the water. He got up and went down to the water's edge. He wanted to see his mother land, and to discover some traces of the intimacy at which he had assisted so long without understanding, and which, in the light of the revelations that Saro and the boys had made, must surely be brazenly advertised in their behavior. As the raft came near the shore his mother waved to him, then sprang gaily into the water and was soon at his side. "Are you hungry? We'll go and have something to eat at once. . . . Good-bye, good-bye till tomorrow. . ." she added in a caressing voice, turning to wave to the young man. Agostino thought she seemed happier than usual, and as he followed her across the beach he could not help thinking there had been a note of joyous intoxication in her farewell to the young man; as if what her son's presence had hitherto prevented had actually taken place that day. But his observations and suspicions went no further than this; for apart from her naïve joy, which was something quite different from her customary dignity, he could not really picture what might have happened while they were out together, nor imagine what their relations actually were. Though he scrutinized her face, her neck, her hands, her body with a new and cruel awareness, they

did not seem to bear any trace of the kisses and caresses they had received. The more Agostino watched his mother the more dissatisfied he felt. "You were alone today . . . without me . . ." he began, as they approached the cabin; almost hoping she would say: "Yes, and at last we were able to make love." But his mother only seemed to treat this remark as an allusion to the slap she had given him, and to his running away. "Don't let's say any more about that," she said, stopping and putting her arm around his shoulders, and looking at him with her laughing, excited eyes. "I know you love me; give me a kiss and we won't say any more about it, eh?" Agostino suddenly felt his lips against her neck—that neck whose chaste perfume and warmth had been so sweet to him. But now he fancied he felt beneath his lips, however faintly, a stirring of something new, as it were a sharp quiver of reaction to the young man's kisses. Then she ran up the steps to the cabin, and he lay down on the sand, his face burning with a shame he could not comprehend.

Later, as they were walking back together, he stirred up these new mysterious feelings in his troubled mind. Before, when he had been ignorant of good and evil, his mother's relations with the young man had seemed to him mysteriously tinged with guilt, but now that Saro and his disciples had opened his eyes, he was, strange to say, full of doubt and unsatisfied curiosity. It was indeed the frank jealousy of his childish love for his mother which had first aroused his sensibilities; whereas now, in the clear, cruel light of day, this love, though as great as ever, was replaced by a bitter, disillusioned curiosity compared with which those early, faint evidences seemed insipid and insufficient. Formerly, every word and gesture which he felt unbecoming had offended without enlightening him, and he wished he had not seen them. Now that he came to look back, those small, tasteless gestures which used to scandalize him seemed mere trifles, and he almost wished he could surprise his mother in some of the shameless attitudes into which Saro and the boys had so recently initiated him.

He would never have hit so soon on the idea of spying on his mother with the direct intention of destroying the halo of dignity and respect which had hitherto enveloped her, had he not that very day been driven by chance to take a step in that direction. When they reached home mother and son ate their luncheon in silence. His mother seemed distrait, and Agostino, full of new and, to him, incredible thoughts, was unusually silent. But after lunch he suddenly felt an irresistible desire to go out and join the gang of boys again. They had told him they met at the Vespucci bathing place early in the afternoon, to plan the day's adventures, and when he had got over his first fear and repugnance the company of those young hooligans began to exercise a mysterious attraction over him. He was lying on his bed with the shutters closed; it was warm and dark. He was playing as usual with the wooden switch of the electric light. Few sounds came to him from outside; the wheels of a solitary carriage, the clatter of plates and glasses through the open windows of the *pension* opposite. In contrast with the silence of the summer afternoon the sounds inside the house seemed to stand out more clearly, as if cut off from the rest. He heard his mother go into the next room and her heels tapping on the tiled floor. She went to and fro, opening and shutting drawers, moving chairs about, touching this and that. "She's gone to lie down," he thought suddenly, shaking off the torpor which was gradually invading his senses; "and then I shan't be able to tell her I want to go on the beach." He sprang up in alarm at the thought, and went out on the landing. His room looked over the balcony facing the stairs, and his mother's room was next to his. He went to her door, but finding it ajar, instead of knocking as he generally did, he gently pushed the door half open, moved perhaps by an unconscious desire to spy upon his mother's intimacy. His mother's room was much bigger than his, and the bed was by the door; directly facing the door was a chest of drawers, with a large mirror above it. The first thing he saw was his mother standing in front of the chest of drawers. She was not naked, as he had pictured and almost hoped

when he went in so quietly; but she was partly undressed and was just taking off her necklace and earrings in front of the glass. She had on a flimsy chiffon chemise which only came half-way down her loins. As she stood leaning languidly to one side, one hip was higher and more prominent than the other, and below her solid but graceful thighs her slender, well-shaped legs tapered to delicate ankles. Her arms were raised to unfasten the clasp of her necklace and, through the transparent chiffon, this movement was perceptible all down her back, curiously modifying the contours of her body. With her hands raised thus, her armpits looked like the jaws of two snakes and the long, soft hair darted out of them like thin black tongues, as if glad to escape from the pressure of her heavy limbs. All her splendid, massive body seemed to Agostino's fascinated eyes to lose its solidity and sway and palpitate in the twilight of the room, as if nudity acted on it as a leaven and endowed it with a strange faculty of expansion; so that at one moment it seemed to billow outwards in innumerable curves, at another to taper upwards to a giant height, and to fill the space between floor and ceiling.

Agostino's first impulse was to hurry away again, but suddenly that new thought, "It is a woman," rooted him to the spot, with wide-open eyes, holding fast to the door handle. He felt his filial soul rebel at this immobility and try to drag him back, but the new mind which was already strong in him, though still a little timid, forced his reluctant eyes to stare pitilessly at what yesterday he would not have dared to look upon. And during this conflict between repulsion and attraction, surprise and pleasure, all the details of the picture he was contemplating stood out more distinctly and forcibly: the movements of her legs, the indolent curve of her back, the profile of her armpits. And they seemed to correspond exactly to his new conception, which was awaiting these confirmations in order to take complete sway over his imagination. Precipitated in one moment from respect and reverence to their exact opposite, he would almost have liked to see the improprieties of her unconscious nudity develop before

his eyes into conscious wantonness. The astonishment in his eyes changed to curiosity, the attention which riveted them and which he fancied to be scientific in reality owed its false objectivity to the cruelty of the sentiment controlling him. And while his blood surged up to his brain he kept saying to himself: "She is a woman, nothing but a woman," and he somehow felt these words to be lashes of insult and contempt on her back and legs.

When his mother had taken off her necklace and put it down on the marble top of the chest of drawers, she began with a graceful movement of both hands to remove her earrings. In order to do so she held her head slightly to one side, turning a little away from the glass. Agostino was afraid she might catch sight of him in the big standing mirror which was nearby in the bay window; for he could see himself in it, standing furtively there, just inside the folding door. He raised his hand with an effort, knocked at the doorpost and said: "May I come in?"

"One moment, darling," said his mother calmly. Agostino saw her disappear from sight and, after rummaging about for a while, reappear in a long blue silk dressing gown.

"Mamma," said Agostino, without lifting his eyes from the ground, "I am going down to the beach."

"Now?" said his mother, abstractedly. "But it's so hot. Hadn't you better sleep a little first?" She put out one hand and stroked his cheek, while with the other she rearranged a stray lock of her smooth black hair.

Agostino suddenly become a child again, said nothing but remained standing, as he always did when any request of his had been refused, obstinately dumb, and looking down, his chin glued to his chest. His mother knew that gesture so well that she interpreted it in the usual way. "Well, if you really want to very much," she said, "go to the kitchen first and get them to give you something to take with you. But don't eat it now ... put it in the cabin ... and mind you don't bathe before five o'clock. Besides, I shall be out by then and we'll swim together." They were the same instructions she always gave him.

Agostino made no reply, and ran barefooted down the stone stairs. He heard his mother's door close gently behind him. He put on his sandals in the hall and went out on to the road. The white blaze of the midday sun enveloped him in its silent furnace. At the end of the road the motionless sea sparkled in the remote, quivering atmosphere. In the opposite direction the red trunks of the pine trees bent under the weight of their heavy green cones.

He debated with himself whether to go to the Vespucci Baths by the beach or by the forest; but chose the former, for though he would be much more exposed to the sun he would be in no danger of passing the baths without seeing them. He followed the road as long as it ran by the sea, then hurried along as fast as he could, keeping close to the walls. Without his realizing it, what attracted him to the Vespucci, apart from the novel companionship of the boys, were their coarse comments on his mother and her supposed amours. He was conscious that his former disposition was changing into quite a different feeling, crueller and more objective, and he thought that their clumsy ironies, by the very fact that they hastened this change, ought to be sought out and cultivated. Why he so much wanted to stop loving his mother, why he even hated himself for loving her, he would have been unable to say. Perhaps because he felt he had been deceived and had thought her to be different from what she really was, or perhaps because, not being able to go on loving her simply and innocently as he had done before, he preferred to stop loving her altogether and to look on her merely as an ordinary woman. He was instinctively trying to free himself once for all from the encumbrance of his old, innocent love which he felt to have been shamefully betrayed; for now it seemed to him mere foolishness and ignorance. And so the same cruel attraction which a few minutes ago had kept his eyes fixed on his mother's back now drove him to seek out the humiliating and coarse companionship of those boys. Might not their scoffing remarks, like her half-revealed nakedness, help

to destroy the old filial relationship which was now so hateful to him? When he came within sight of the baths he slowed down, and though his heart was beating violently so that he could hardly breathe, he assumed an air of indifference.

Saro was sitting as before at his rickety table, on which were a half-empty bottle of wine, a glass, and a bowl containing the remains of fish soup. But there seemed to be no one else about, though as he got nearer the curtain opened and he saw the black body of the Negro boy Homs lying on the white sand.

Saro took no notice at all of the Negro, but went on smoking meditatively, a dilapidated old straw hat rammed down over one eye. "Aren't they here?" asked Agostino in a tone of disappointment. Saro looked up and observed him for a moment, then said: "They've gone to Rio." Rio was a deserted part of the shore, a few kilometers further on, where a stream ran into the sea between sandbanks and reeds.

"Oh dear," said Agostino regretfully, "they've gone to Rio . . . what for?"

It was the Negro who replied. "They've gone to have a picnic there," and he put his hand to his mouth with an expressive gesture. But Saro shook his head and said: "You boys won't be happy till someone's put a bullet through you." It was clear that their picnic was only a pretext for stealing fruit in the orchards; at least, so it seemed to Agostino.

"I didn't go with them," put in the Negro obsequiously, as if to ingratiate himself with Saro.

"You didn't go because you didn't want to," said Saro calmly.

The Negro rolled in the sand, protesting: "I didn't go because I wanted to stay with you."

He spoke in a honeyed, singsong voice. Saro said contemptuously: "Who gave you permission to be so familiar, you little nigger? We're not brothers as far as I know."

"No, we're not brothers," said the other in an unruffled, even triumphant tone, as if the observation gave him profound satisfaction.

"You keep your place then," said Saro. Then, turning to Agostino: "They've gone to steal some corn. That's what their picnic'll be."

"Are they coming back?" asked Agostino anxiously. Saro said nothing but kept looking at Agostino and seemed to be turning something over in his mind. "They won't be back very soon," he replied slowly; "not till late. But if you like we'll go after them."

"But how?"

"In the boat," said Saro.

"Oh yes, let's go in the boat," said the Negro. He sprang up, all eagerness, and approached Saro, but the latter did not give him a glance.

"I have a sailboat . . . in about half an hour we shall be at Rio, if the wind's favorable."

"Yes, let's go," said Agostino happily. "But if they're in the fields how shall we find them?"

"Never you fear," said Saro, getting up and giving a twist to the black sash round his stomach. "We shall find them all right." Then he turned to the Negro, who was watching him anxiously, and added: "Come on, nigger, help me carry down the sail and mast."

"I'm coming, Saro, I'm coming," reiterated the jubilant Negro, and he followed Saro down to the boat.

Left by himself Agostino stood up and looked round him. A light wind had sprung up from the northwest, and the sea, covered now with tiny wavelets, had changed to an almost violet blue. The shore was enveloped in a haze of sun and sand, as far as the eye could see. Agostino, who did not know where Rio was, followed with a nostalgic eye that capricious indentations of the lonely coast line. Where was Rio? Somewhere out there, he supposed, where earth, sky and sea were mingled in one confused blackness under the pitiless sun. He looked forward intensely to the expedition, and would not have missed it for worlds.

He was startled from these reflections by the voices of the two coming out of the hut. Saro was carrying on one arm a pile of ropes and sails, while in the other he hugged a bottle. Behind him walked the Negro, brandishing like a spear a tall mast partly painted green. "Well, let's be *off*," said Saro, starting down the

beach without glancing at Agostino. His manner seemed to Agostino curiously hurried, quite different from his usual one. He also noticed that those repulsive red nostrils looked redder and more inflamed than usual, as if all their network of little branching veins had suddenly become swollen with an inrush of blood. "*Si va . . . si va . . .*" intoned the Negro behind Saro, improvising a sort of dance on the sand, with the mast under his arm. But Saro had nearly reached the huts and the Negro slackened his pace to wait for Agostino. When he was near, the Negro signaled him to stop. Agostino did so.

"Listen," said the Negro, with an air of familiarity. "I've got to talk something over with Saro . . . please oblige . . . please . . . by not coming. Go away, please!"

"Why?" asked Agostino, much surprised.

"I told you I've got to talk something over with him . . . just the two of us," said the other impatiently, stamping his foot on the ground.

"I *must* go to Rio," replied Agostino.

"You can go another time."

"No—I can't."

The Negro looked at him, and his eyes and trembling nostrils betrayed a passionate eagerness which revolted Agostino. "Listen, Pisa," he said, "if you'll stay behind I'll give you something you've never seen before." He dropped the mast and felt in his pocket and brought out a slingshot made of a fork of pinewood and two elastics bound together. "It's lovely, isn't it," and the Negro held it up.

But Agostino wanted to go to Rio. Besides, the Negro's insistence aroused his suspicions. "No, I can't," he said.

"Take it," the other said again, feeling for Agostino's hand and trying to force the slingshot into his palm. "Take it and go away."

"No," repeated Agostino, "I can't."

"I'll give you the slingshot and these cards, too," said the Negro, feeling in his pocket again; and he drew out a small pack of cards with pink backs and gilt edges. "Take them all and go away. You can kill birds with the slingshot . . . the cards are quite new."

"I told you I won't," said Agostino.

The Negro turned on him an eye of passionate entreaty. Great drops of sweat shone on his forehead, his whole face was contorted in an expression of utter misery. "But why won't you?" he whined.

"I don't want to," said Agostino, and he suddenly ran towards the bath man, who was now standing by the boat. As he reached Saro he heard the Negro call after him: "You'll be sorry for this." The boat was resting on two rollers of unplaned fir a short way up the beach. Saro had thrown the sails into the boat and seemed to be waiting impatiently. "What's he up to?" he asked Agostino, pointing to the Negro.

"He's just coming," said Agostino.

And in fact the Negro came running over the sand with great leaps, holding the mast under his arm. Saro took hold of the mast with the six fingers of his right hand, and with the six fingers of his left reared it up and planted it in a hole in the middle seat. Then he got into the boat, fastened the sail and loosened the sheet. Saro turned to the Negro and said: "Now let's shove off from underneath."

Saro stood beside the boat, grasping the edges of the prow, while the Negro made ready to push from behind. Agostino, not knowing what to do, looked on. The boat was of medium size, part white and part green. On the prow, in black lettering, was written *Amelia*. "*Ah . . . issa*," commanded Saro. The boat slid forward on its rollers over the sand. As soon as the keel passed over the hindmost roller the Negro bent down and took it in his arms, pressing it to his breast like a baby; then leaping over the sand as in a novel kind of ballet, he ran and placed it under the prow. "*Ah . . . issa*," repeated Saro.

The boat slid forward again quite a distance, and again the Negro gamboled and caracoled from stern to prow, with the roller in his arms; one last shove, and the prow of the boat dipped into the water and it was afloat. Saro got in and placed the oars in the rowlocks; then, grasping one in each hand, he motioned to Agostino to jump in, excluding the Negro as if by prearrangement. Agostino entered the water up

to his knees and tried to climb in. He would never have succeeded had not the six fingers of Saro's right hand seized him firmly by one arm and pulled him up like a cat. He looked up. Saro was lifting him with one arm, without looking in his direction, for he was busy adjusting the left-hand oar. Agostino, in disgust at being grasped by those fingers, went off and sat in the stern. "Good," said Saro, "you stay there; now we are going to take her out."

"Wait for me, I'm coming too!" shouted the Negro from the shore. Exhausted by his efforts he sprang into the water and seized the edge of the boat. But Saro said: "No, you're not coming."

"What am I to do?" cried the boy, in an agony of disappointment. "What am I to do?"

"You can take the trolley," answered Saro, standing up in the boat and pulling hard. "You'll get there before us, see if you don't."

"But why, Saro?" wailed the Negro, thrashing along in the water beside the boat. "Why, Saro? I want to go too."

Without a word Saro dropped his oars, bent over and covered the Negro's face with his enormous hand. "I've told you you're not coming," he said quietly, and with one push sent the Negro over backward in the water. "Why, Saro?" he went on wailing. "Why, Saro?" and his melancholy voice, mingled with the splashing of the oars, made an unpleasant impression on Agostino and aroused in him an uneasy sense of pity. He looked at Saro, who smiled and said: "He's such a nuisance. What do we want with him?"

The boat was already some way from the shore. Agostino looked round and saw the Negro get out of the water and, as he thought, shake his fist threateningly at him.

Saro silently took out the oars and laid them down in the bottom of the boat. Then he went to the prow, undid the sail and fastened it to the mast. The sail fluttered uncertainly for a moment, as if the wind were blowing on both sides of it at once; then suddenly, with a violent shock swelled in the wind and leaned over to the left. The boat obediently settled down on

its left side too, and began to skim over the waves, driven by the light breeze. "Good," said Saro, "now we can lie down and rest a bit." He settled down in the bottom of the boat and invited Agostino to lie beside him. "If we sit in the bottom," he explained, "the boat goes faster." Agostino obeyed, and lay down beside Saro.

The boat made swift progress in spite of its heavy build, rising and falling with the little waves and occasionally rearing up like a foal which feels the bit for the first time. Saro lay with his head resting against the seat, and one arm behind Agostino's neck, controlling the rudder. For a while he said nothing; then: "Do you go to school?" he asked at last.

Agostino looked up. Saro was half-lying and seemed to be exposing his wide, inflamed nostrils to the sea air, as if to refresh them. His mouth was open under his mustache, his eyes half-shut. His unbuttoned shirt revealed the dirty, grey, ruffled hair on his chest. "Yes," said Agostino, suddenly trembling with fear.

"What class are you in?"

"The third."

"Give me your hand," said Saro; and before Agostino could refuse he seized hold of it. To Agostino his grasp felt like a vice. The six short, stumpy fingers encircled his whole hand and met below it. "What do they teach you?" Saro went on, stretching himself out more comfortably and sinking into a kind of ecstasy.

"Latin . . . Italian . . . geography . . . history . . ." stammered Agostino.

"Do they teach you poetry . . . lovely poetry?" asked Saro, in a low voice.

"Yes," said Agostino, "poetry as well."

"Recite some to me."

The boat plunged, and Saro shifted the rudder without changing his beatific attitude. "I don't know what . . ." began Agostino, feeling more and more embarrassed and frightened. "I learn a lot of poetry . . . Carducci . . ."

"Ah yes, Carducci," repeated Saro mechanically. "Say a poem by Carducci."

"*Le fonti del Clitunno*," suggested Agostino, terri-

fied by that hand which would not let him go, and trying little by little to escape from it.

"Yes, *Le fonti del Clitunno,*" said Saro in a dreamy voice.

Ancor dal monte che di foschi ondeggia
frassini al vento mormoranti e lunge

began Agostino in a shaky voice.

The boat sped on, and Saro, still stretched at full length with closed eyes and his nose to the wind, began to move his head up and down as if scanning the lines. Agostino clung to poetry as the only means of escape from a conversation which he intuitively felt to be dangerous and compromising, and went on reciting slowly and clearly. Meanwhile, he kept trying to release his hand from those six imprisoning fingers; but they held him more tightly than ever. With terror he saw the end of the poem drawing near, and not knowing what to do he joined the first line of *Davanti a San Guido* on to the last line of *Fonti del Clitunno.* Here would be proof, if any were needed, that Saro didn't care a bit about the poetry but had something quite different in view; *what,* Agostino could not understand. The experiment succeeded. "*I cipressi che a Bolgheri alti e schietti*" suddenly began without Saro giving the faintest sign of noticing the change. Then Agostino broke off and said in an exasperated voice: "Let go, please," and tried at the same time to pull his hand quite away.

Saro started, and without letting go of him, opened his eyes and turned to look at him. He must have read such violent antipathy and such obvious terror on Agostino's face that he suddenly realized that his plan, for he certainly had a plan, was a complete failure. He slowly withdrew one finger after another from Agostino's aching hand and said in a low voice, as if speaking to himself: "What are you afraid of? We're going ashore now."

He dragged himself to his feet and pulled round the rudder. The boat turned its prow towards the shore.

Still rubbing his cramped fingers, Agostino got up from the bottom of the boat without a word and went to sit in the prow. By now the boat was not far from

the shore. He could see the whole beach, the white stretch of sun-bleached sand which at that point was very wide, and beyond the beach the dense, brooding green of the pines. Rio was at a gap in the high dunes, overhung by a greenish-blue mass of reeds. But before they got to Rio, Agostino saw a group of people on the beach, and from the center of this group there rose a long thread of black smoke. He turned to Saro, who was sitting in the stern controlling the rudder with one hand. "Is this where we get out?"

"Yes, this is Rio," replied Saro indifferently.

As the boat drew nearer and nearer to the shore Agostino saw the group gathered round the fire suddenly break up and start running down to the water's edge, and he at once saw that it was the boys. He could see them waving and probably calling out, but the wind carried their voices away. "Is it them?" he asked nervously.

"Yes, it's them," said Saro.

The boat drew nearer still and Agostino could clearly distinguish the boys. They were all there: Tortima, Berto, Sandro, and the others. And there was the Negro Homs, leaping along the shore and shouting with the others, a discovery which for some reason gave him a very uncomfortable feeling.

The boat made straight for the shore where with a rapid turn of the rudder, Saro brought it in crosswise, and throwing himself upon the sail clasped it in both arms and lowered it to the deck. The boat swung motionless in the shallow water. Saro took a small anchor from the bottom and threw it into the water. "Let's go ashore," he said. He climbed over the edge of the boat and waded through the water to meet the boys who were waiting on the beach.

Agostino saw the boys crowding around him and apparently offering his congratulations, which Saro received with a shake of his head. Still louder applause greeted his own arrival, and for a moment he was deceived into thinking they were welcoming him cordially. But he soon realized he was mistaken. Their laughter was mocking and sarcastic. Berto called out: "Good old Pisa, he enjoys going out for a sail," while

Tortima, putting his fingers into his mouth, gave a rude whistle. The others imitated him. Even Sandro, usually so reserved, looked at him with contempt. As for the Negro, he did nothing but jump about around Saro, who went on ahead towards the fire the boys had lit on the beach. Surprised and vaguely alarmed, Agostino went and sat down among the others around the fire.

The boys had made a sort of rough oven out of damp compressed sand. Inside was a fire of dried pine cones, pine needles and twigs. Heaped up in the mouth of the oven were about a dozen ears of corn, slowly roasting. Spread out on a newspaper near the fire were masses of fruit and a watermelon. "He's a fine one, is our Pisa," said Berto, when they had sat down. "You and Homs are buddies now, you ought to be sitting together . . . you're brothers, you two; he's black, you're white . . . that's all there is to it . . . and you both like going for a sail."

The Negro chuckled appreciatively. Saro was bending down to give the corncobs another turn in front of the fire. The others laughed derisively. Berto went so far as to give Agostino a push which sent him against Homs, so that for a moment their backs were touching; one chuckling with depraved self-satisfaction, the other bewildered and disgusted. "But I don't know what you mean," said Agostino suddenly. "I went out in the boat; what harm is there in that?"

"Aha, what harm is there in that? He went out in the boat. What harm is there in that?" repeated many scoffing voices. Some were holding their sides with laughter.

"Yes, indeed, what harm?" repeated Berto, turning to him again. "No harm at all! Why, Homs thinks it's grand, don't you Homs?"

The Negro assented ecstatically. And now the truth began dimly to dawn on Agostino, for he couldn't help seeing some connection between their taunts and Saro's odd behavior in the boat. "I don't know what you mean," he declared. "I didn't do anything wrong in that boat. Saro made me recite some poems, that's all."

"Ah, ah, those poems," was heard on all sides.

"Isn't it true what I say, Saro?" cried Agostino, red in the face.

Saro didn't say yes or no; he contented himself with smiling, watching him all the while with a certain curiosity. The boys interpreted his air of pretended indifference, which was really a cloak for his treachery and vanity, as giving the lie to Agostino. "Oh, of course," they all struck up together: "He asks the host if the wine is good, eh, Saro? That's a good one! Oh, Pisa, Pisa!" The Negro was having his revenge, and enjoying himself particularly. Agostino suddenly turned on him, trembling with rage, and said: "What is there to laugh at?"

"I'm not laughing," he replied, edging away.

"Now, don't you two quarrel," said Berto. "Saro will have to see about making you friends again." But the boys lost all interest when the issue seemed to be settling itself peacefully, and were already talking of other things. They were telling how they had crept into a field and stolen corn and fruit; how they had seen the enraged farmer coming towards them with a gun; how they had run away, and the farmer had fired salt at them without hitting anyone. Meanwhile, the ears were ready, beautifully toasted on the embers. Saro took them out of the oven and with his usual fatherly air parceled out one to each. Agostino took advantage of a moment when they were busy eating, and sprang across to Sandro, who was sitting a little apart, eating his corn grain by grain.

"I don't understand," he began. The other gave him a knowing look and Agostino felt he need say no more. "The Moor came by trolley," said Sandro slowly, "and he said you and Saro had gone sailing."

"But what harm is there in that?"

"It's no business of mine," replied Sandro, casting down his eyes. "It's up to you . . . you and the Moor. But as for Saro," he stopped and looked at Agostino.

"Well?"

"Well, I wouldn't have gone out alone with Saro."

"But why?"

Sandro looked carefully round him, then in a low

voice gave the explanation which Agostino somehow expected, without being able to say why. "Ah," he said... but he could say no more and went back to the others. Squatting in the middle of the boys, with his imperturbable, good-natured head on one side, Saro had the air of a kind paterfamilias surrounded by his sons. But Agostino felt a deep loathing when he looked at him, greater in fact than he felt for the Negro. What made Agostino hate him more was his silence when appealed to, as if he wanted the boys to believe that what they had accused him of had really taken place. Besides, he could not help noticing that their scorn and derision had set a wide gulf between him and his companions—the same gulf which he now realized separated them from the Negro; only the Negro, instead of being humiliated and offended, as he himself was, seemed somehow to relish it. He tried more than once to turn the conversation on to the subject which so tormented him, but was met with laughter and an insulting indifference. Moreover, in spite of Sandro's only too clear explanation, he still could not quite grasp what had really happened. Everything seemed dark around him and within him, as if instead of beach, sea and sky, there were only shadows and vague, menacing forms.

Meanwhile, the boys had finished eating their roasted corn and tossed the bare cobs away in the sand. "Let's go swim at Rio," suggested someone, and the proposal was immediately accepted. Saro went with them, for it was agreed that he should take them all back to Vespucci in the boat.

As they walked along the sand Sandro left the others and came over to Agostino. "If you're offended with the Moor," he said, "why don't you put the fear of God into him?"

"How?" asked Agostino, in a discouraged tone.

"Give him a good hiding."

"But he's stronger than me," said Agostino, remembering the duel of the iron arm. "Unless you will help me."

"Why should I help you? It's your concern... yours and his." Sandro pronounced these words in such a

way as to make it quite clear that he took the same view as the others as to the reason for Agostino's hatred of the Negro. A sense of terrible bitterness pierced Agostino to the heart. So Sandro, the only one who had shown him any kindness, believed that calumny too. After giving him this advice Sandro went off to rejoin the others, as if he were afraid of being seen with Agostino. From the beach they had passed through a forest of young pines; then they crossed a sandy path and entered the reed beds. The reeds grew thick and tall, and many had a white, plumy crest; the boys appeared and disappeared between their long green spears, slipping about on the damp earth and pushing the stiff, fibrous leaves aside with a dry, rustling sound. At last they came to a place where the reed bed widened around a low, muddy bank; at sight of them big frogs leaped from all sides into the opaque, glassy water; and there they began to undress, all together, under the eyes of Saro, who sat fully clothed on a rock overlooking the reeds, and appeared to be absorbed in his cigar, but was really watching them all the time through his half-closed eyelids. Agostino was ashamed to join them, but he was so afraid of being laughed at that he too began to unbutton his trousers, taking as long as he could about it and keeping an eye on the others. The rest seemed to be overjoyed at getting rid of their clothes, and bumped into each other shouting with glee. They looked very white against the background of green reeds, with an unpleasant, squalid whiteness from groin to belly, and this pallor only emphasized a sort of graceless and excessive muscularity which is especially to be found in manual workers. The graceful, well-proportioned Sandro, whose pubic hair was as fair as that on his head, was the only one who hardly seemed to be naked, perhaps because his skin was equally bronzed over his whole body; in any case his nakedness was quite different from that repulsive nakedness displayed in the public baths.

Before diving in the boys played all sorts of obscene pranks; opening their legs wide, poking and touching each other with a loose promiscuity which astounded

Agostino, to whom this sort of thing was quite new. He was naked too, and his feet were black from the cold, filthy mud, but he would have liked to have hidden himself in the reeds, if only to escape the looks which Saro, who sat hunched up motionless like one of those huge frogs native to the reed bed, darted at him through half-closed eyes. But as usual his repugnance was less strong than the mysterious attraction which bound him to the gang; the two were so indissolubly mixed up together that it was impossible for him to distinguish between his horror and the pleasure which underlay it. The boys displayed themselves each in turn, boasting of their virility and bodily prowess. Tortima, the vainest of all, and in spite of his disproportionate strength the most squalid and plebian looking, was so elated as to call out to Agostino: "Suppose I was to appear before your mother, one fine morning, naked like this, what would she say? Would she go along with me?"

"No," said Agostino.

"And I tell you that she'd come along at once," said Tortima. "She'd just give me one good look over, to see what I was good for, and then she'd say: 'Come along, Tortima, let's be off.'" The gross absurdity of his suggestion made them all laugh, and at his cry: 'Come, Tortima, let's be off!' they flung themselves one after another into the water, diving in head over heels, just like the frogs whom their coming had disturbed.

The shore was so entirely surrounded by reeds that only a short stretch of the river was visible. But when they got into the middle of the stream they could see the whole river which, with an imperceptible motion of its dark, dense waters, flowed toward the mouth further down among the sandbanks. Upstream the river continued between two lines of large silvery bushes which cast delightful reflections in the water; till one came to a little iron bridge, beyond which the reeds, pines and poplars were so dense as to prevent further passage. A red house, half-hidden among the trees, seemed to keep guard over this bridge.

For a moment Agostino felt happy, as he swam in that cold, powerful water which seemed to be trying

to bear his legs away with it; he forgot for a moment all his wrongs and crosses. The boys swam about in all directions, their heads and arms emerging from the smooth green surface. Their voices resounded in the limpid, windless air; seen through the transparency of the water their bodies might have been the white shoots of plants blossoming out of the depths and moving hither and yon as the current drew them. Agostino swam up to Berto, who was not far off, and asked: "Are there many fish in this river?"

Berto looked at him and said: "What are you doing here? Why don't you keep Saro company?"

"I like swimming," replied Agostino, feeling miserable again; and he turned and swam away.

But he was not so strong or experienced a swimmer as the others; he soon got tired, and let the current carry him towards the mouth of the river. He had soon left the boys and their clamor behind him; the reeds grew thinner; through the clear, colorless water he could see the sandy bottom over which grey eddies flowed continually. At last he came to a deeper green pool, the stream's transparent eye as it were; and when he had passed this his feet touched the sand, and after struggling a moment against the force of the water he climbed out on the bank. Where the stream flowed into the sea it curled round itself and formed a knot of water. The stream then lost its compactness and spread out fanwise, growing thinner and thinner till it was no more than a liquid veil thrown over the smooth sands. The tide flowed up into the river with tiny foam-flecked wavelets. Here and there in the watery sand, pools forgotten by the stream reflected the bright sky. Agostino walked about for a little, naked on the soft, mirroring sand, and enjoyed stamping on it with his feet and seeing the water suddenly rise to the surface and flood his footprints. There arose in him a vague and desperate desire to ford the river and walk on and on down the coast, leaving far behind him the boys, Saro, his mother and all the old life. Who knows whether, if he were to go straight ahead and never turn back, walking, walking on that soft white sand, he might not at last come to a country where none of

these horrible things existed; a country where he would be welcomed as he longed to be, and where it would be possible for him to forget all he had learned and then learn it again without all that shame and horror, gently and naturally as he dimly felt it might be possible. He gazed at the dark, remote horizon which enclosed the utmost boundaries of sea and shore and forest and felt drawn to that immensity as to something which might set him free from his bondage. The shouts of the boys racing across the shore to the boat roused him from his melancholy imaginings. One of them was waving his clothes in the air, and Berto was calling: "Pisa, we're off!" He shook himself and walked along at the edge of the sea to join the gang.

The boys were thronging together in the shallow water. Saro was warning them in fatherly tones that the boat was too small to hold them all, but he was clearly only teasing them. Screaming, the boys flung themselves like mad upon the boat; twenty hands at once clutched the sides, and in a twinkling the boat was filled with their gesticulating bodies. Some lay down on the bottom, others sat in a heap in the stern around the rudder, some in the prow, others on the seats; others again sat on the edge and let their feet dangle in the water. The boat really was too small for so many, and the water came almost to the top.

"We're all here then, are we?" said Saro in great good humor. He stood up, let out the sail, and the boat sped out to sea. The boys cheered its departure loudly.

But Agostino did not share their happy mood. He was looking out for a favorable opportunity to prove his innocence and remove the unjust stigma which oppressed him. He took advantage of a moment when the other boys were deep in some discussion, to scramble up to the Negro who was sitting alone in the bow and resembled in his blackness a new kind of figurehead. Squeezing one arm hard, Agostino demanded: "What did you go and say about me just now?"

It was a bad moment to choose, but it was Agostino's first opportunity of getting near the Negro who had taken good care to keep at a distance while they

were on shore. "I spoke the truth," said Homs, without looking at him.

"What is the truth?"

The Negro's reply terrified Agostino. "It's no good your squeezing my arm like that. I only spoke the truth. But if you go on setting Saro against me I shall tell your mother everything. So look out, Pisa."

"What!" cried Agostino, seeing an abyss open beneath his feet. "What do you mean? Are you crazy? I... I..." He stammered, unable to follow up in words the frightful vision his imagination suddenly summoned up. But he had no time to continue. Shouts of derision broke out all over the boat.

"Look at them both side by side," laughed Berto. "Look at them! What a shame we haven't got a camera to take them both together." Agostino turned round, his face burning, and saw them all laughing. Even Saro was smiling under his mustache, as with half-closed eyes he puffed at his cigar. Agostino drew back from the Negro, as from the touch of a reptile, and with his arms around his knees sat watching the sea, his eyes full of tears.

On the horizon the sun was setting in clouds of fire above a violet sea, shot with pointed, glassy rays. The wind had risen and the boat made slow progress, listing heavily to one side under its load of boys. The prow of the boat was turned out to sea and seemed to be directed towards the dark profiles of far-off islands which rose among the red smoke of sunset like mountains at the end of a distant plateau. Saro, holding firmly between his knees the boys' stolen watermelon, split it open with his seaman's knife and cut off large slices which he distributed to them paternally. They passed the slices and bit into them greedily, spitting out the seeds and tearing off pieces of the flesh. Then one after another the sections of red, close-gnawed rind flew overboard into the sea. After the melon it was the turn of the wine flask, which Saro solemnly produced from under the stern. The bottle made the round of the boat, and even Agostino was obliged to swallow a mouthful. It was warm and strong and at once went to his head. When the empty bottle had

returned to its place Tortima sang an indecent song, and they all joined in the refrain. Between verses they pressed Agostino to sing too, for they had noticed his black mood; but no one spoke to him except to tease him and incite him to sing. Agostino felt within him a heavy weight of pent-up grief which the windy sea and magnificent fires of sunset on the violet waters only made more bitter and unbearable. It seemed to him horribly unjust that it was on such a sea under such a sky that a boat like theirs should be sailing, so crowded with malice, cruelty, falsehood and corruption. That boat, overflowing with boys gesticulating like obscene monkeys, with the fat and blissful Saro at the helm, was to him an incredible and melancholy sight in the midst of all that beauty. At moments he wished it would sink; he would have liked to die himself, he thought, and no longer be infected and stained by all that impurity. How far away seemed the morning when he had for the first time looked upon the red awning of the Vespucci Baths; far away and belonging to an age already dead. Each time the boat rose on an unusually high wave they gave a yell which made him shudder; each time the Negro addressed him with his revolting and hypocritically slavish humility, he tried not to listen and drew back still further into the prow. He was dimly conscious of having on that fatal day entered upon an age of difficulties and miseries from which he could see no way of escape. The boat made a long trip, going as far as the port and then turning back again. When they at last touched land Agostino ran off without saying good-bye to anyone. But he had not gone far before he slackened his pace and looking back saw the boys helping Saro pull the boat up on the beach. It was already getting dark.

THAT DAY WAS THE BEGINNING of a dark and troubled time for Agostino. On that day his eyes had been opened for him by force, but what he had learned was

too much for him, a burden greater than he could bear. It was not so much their novelty as the quality of the things he had learned which oppressed and poisoned him; they were too appalling and too portentous for him to assimilate. He thought, for example, that after that day's disclosures about his mother his relations with her would have become clarified; that the uneasiness, distaste and even disgust which, after Saro's revelations, her caresses awoke in him would somehow, as if by enchantment, be resolved and reconciled in a new and serene consciousness. But it was not so; the uneasiness, distaste and disgust remained, rising in the first instance from the shock and bewilderment to his filial love occasioned by his obscure realization of his mother's femininity, and after that morning in Saro's tent rising from a bitter sense of guilty curiosity which his traditional and abiding respect for his mother rendered intolerable to him. At first he had unconsciously tried to break loose from that affection by an unjustified dislike, but now it seemed to him a duty to separate his newly won reasoned knowledge from his sense of blood relationship with someone whom he wanted to consider only as a woman. He felt that if only he could see in his mother what Saro and the boys did—just a beautiful woman—then all his unhappiness would disappear; and he tried with all his might to seek out occasions which would confirm him in this belief. But the only result was that his former reverence and affection gave place to cruelty and sensuality.

At home his mother did not hide herself from him any more than she had before, and was unaware of any change in his attitude towards her. As his mother, she had no sense of shame; but to Agostino it seemed that she was wantonly provocative. He would hear her calling him, and would go to her room to find her at her toilet, in negligee and with her breasts half-uncovered. Or he would wake to find her bending over him to give him his morning kiss, with her dressing gown open so that he could clearly see the shape of her body through her fragile, crumpled nightgown. She would go to and fro in front of him as if he were not

there; putting on or taking off her stockings, putting on her clothes, applying perfume or make-up; and all those acts which Agostino had once thought so natural now seemed to him the outward and visible signs of a much more embracing and more dangerous reality, so that his mind was torn between curiosity and pain. He kept saying to himself: "She's only a woman," with the objective indifference of a connoisseur. But a moment later, unable to endure either her maternal unselfconsciousness or his own watchfulness, he would have liked to shout: "Cover yourself up, go away, don't let me see you any more, I'm not the same as I used to be." But his hope of judging his mother as a woman and nothing more almost immediately suffered shipwreck. He soon saw that even if she had become a woman she remained in his eyes all the more his mother; and he realized that the cruel sense of shame which he had at first attributed to the novelty of his feelings would now never leave him. He saw in a flash that she would always remain for him the person he had loved with such a free and pure love; she would always mix with her most feminine gestures those purely affectionate ones which for so long had been the only ones he knew; never would he be able to separate his new conception of her from his now wounded memory of her former dignity. He did not for a moment doubt that the facts of her relationship with the young man really were as reported by the boys in Saro's tent. And he wondered secretly at the change which had taken place in him. At first he had only felt jealousy of his mother and antipathy towards the young man; both feelings being rather veiled and indefinite. But now, in his effort to remain objective and calm, he would have wished to feel sympathy for the young man and indifference towards his mother. But this sympathy seemed somehow to make him an accomplice, and his indifference to make him indiscreet. He very seldom went out with them now on the raft, for he generally contrived to avoid being invited. But whenever he went he was conscious of studying the young man's gestures and words almost as if he wanted him to overstep the limits of permitted social

gallantry, and of studying his mother almost in the hope of having his suspicions confirmed. At the same time these sentiments were intolerable to him because they were the exact opposite of what he wanted to feel, and he would almost have liked to feel again the pity which his mother's foolish behavior had once aroused in him; it was more human and affectionate than his present merciless dissection.

Those days of inner conflict left him with a confused sense of impurity. He felt that he had exchanged his former state of innocence, not for the manly calm he had hoped for, but a dark, indeterminate state in which he found no compensating advantages, but only fresh perplexities in addition to the old. What was the good of seeing clearly, if this clarity only brought with it deeper shades of darkness? Sometimes he wondered how older boys than himself managed to go on loving their mother when they knew what he knew; and he concluded that such knowledge must at once destroy their filial affection, whereas in his own case the one did not banish the other, but they existed side by side in a dreary tangle.

As sometimes happens, the place which was the scene of these discoveries and conflicts—his home—became almost intolerable to him. The sea, the sun, the crowd of bathers, the presence of many other women at least distracted him and deadened his sensibilities. But here, between the four walls of his home, alone with his mother, he felt exposed to every kind of temptation, beset by every kind of contradiction. On the beach his mother was one among many other sun bathers; here she seemed overpowering and unique. Just as on a small stage the actors seem larger than life, so here every gesture and word of hers stood out with extraordinary definition. Agostino had a very lively and adventurous sensibility in regard to the familiar things of his home. When he was a child every passage, every nook and corner, every room had had for him a mysterious and incalculable character; they were places in which you might make the strangest discoveries and live through the most fantastic adventures. But now, after his meeting with

those boys in the red tent, these adventures and discoveries were of a quite different kind, so that he did not know whether to be more attracted or frightened by them. Formerly he used to imagine ambushes, shadows, spirits, voices in the furniture and in the walls; but now his fancy, even more actively than in his exuberant childhood, attached itself to the new realities with which the walls, the furniture, the very air of the house seemed to him to be impregnated. And in place of his old innocent excitement which his mother's good-night kiss and dreamless sleep could always calm, he was tormented by a burning and shameful curiosity which at night grew to giant proportions and seemed to find in darkness more food for its impure fire.

Everywhere in the house he seemed to spy out traces of a woman's presence, the only woman whom he had ever known intimately; and that woman was his mother. When he was with her he felt as if he were somehow mounting guard over her; when he approached her door he felt he was spying on her; if he touched her clothes he felt as if it was herself he was touching, for she had worn these clothes, they had held her body. At night he dreamed with his eyes open, and had agonizing nightmares. He would sometimes imagine himself to be a child again, afraid of every sound, of every shadow, and would spring up to run and take refuge in his mother's bed; but as soon as his feet touched the ground he realized, sleepy and bewildered though he was, that his fear was only a cunning mask for curiosity and that directly he was in his mother's arms his nocturnal vision would reveal its true purpose. Or he would wake suddenly and wonder whether by chance the young man of the raft were there at that very moment in his mother's room on the other side of the wall. Certain sounds seemed to confirm this suspicion, others to contradict it; he would toss restlessly in bed for a while, and at last, without the smallest idea how he had got there, would find himself in the passage in his nightshirt, listening and spying outside his mother's room. Once he could not resist the temptation of going in without knocking, and

he stood motionless in the middle of the room in the diffused moonlight which entered through the open window, his eyes fixed on the bed where he could distinguish his mother's black hair spread out over the pillow, and her long, softly rounded limbs. "Is that you, Agostino?" she asked, waking up. Without saying a word he turned and hurried back to his room.

His reluctance to remain alone with his mother drove him more and more to Vespucci. But here other torments awaited him, and made the place as odious to him as his home. The boys' attitude towards him after he had been out alone in the boat with Saro had not changed at all; it had in fact assumed a definite and final form, as if founded on an unshakable conviction. For he was the one who had accepted that signal and sinister favor from Saro; it was impossible to get that idea out of their mind. So that, in addition to the jealousy and contempt they had felt for him from the first on account of his being rich, was now added another source of contempt... his supposed depravity. And in the minds of those young savages the one seemed to justify the other, the one to grow out of the other. They seemed by their humiliating and cruel treatment of him to imply that he was rich and therefore naturally depraved. Agostino was quick to perceive the subtle relation between these two charges, and he dimly felt that they were making him pay for being different from them and superior to them. His social difference and superiority were expressed in his clothes and his talk about the luxury of his home, in his tastes and manner of speech; his moral difference and superiority impelled him to refute the charge of having had any such relations with Saro, and kept showing itself in open disgust at the boys' manners and habits. So at last, prompted by the humiliating position in which he found himself rather than exercising any definite choice of his own, he decided to be what they seemed to want him to be... that is, just like themselves. He began wearing his oldest and dirtiest clothes, to the great surprise of his mother, who noticed that he no longer took any pride in his appearance; he made a point of never mention-

ing his luxurious home, and he took as ostentatious pleasure in ways and habits which up to that time had disgusted him. But worst of all, and it needed a great effort to nerve himself to it, one day when they were making their usual jokes about his going out alone with Saro, he said that he was tired of denying it, and that what they accused him of had really happened, and that he didn't care whether they knew it or not. Saro was startled by these assertions, but perhaps from fear of exposing himself did not deny them. The boys were also very much surprised to hear him admitting the truth of gossip which had seemed to torment him so much before. He was so timid and shy that they would never have given him credit for so much courage, but they very soon began raining down questions on him as to what had really happened; and then he lost heart, got red in the face and refused to say another word. Naturally the boys interpreted his silence in their own way, as being due to shame and not, as it really was, to his ignorance and incapacity to invent. And the usual load of taunts and low jokes became heavier than ever.

But in spite of this breakdown he really had changed. Without being conscious of it himself, without really trying to, he had, by dint of spending so much time with the boys every day, ended by becoming very like them, and had lost his old tastes without really acquiring any new ones. More than once, in a mood of revolt against Vespucci, he had joined in the more innocent games at Speranza, seeking out his playmates of earlier in the summer. But how colorless and dull those nicely brought-up boys now seemed to him, how boring their regulation walks under the eye of parents or tutors, how insipid their school gossip, their stamp collections, books of adventure and such-like. The fact is that the company of the gang, their talk about women, their thieving expeditions in the orchards, even the acts of oppression and violence of which he had himself been a victim, had transformed him and made him intolerant of his former friendships. It was during this time that something happened which brought this home to him more

strongly. One morning when he arrived late at Vespucci he found no one there. Saro was off on some business of his own, and there were no boys to be seen. He wandered gloomily to the water's edge and seated himself on a float. Suddenly, as he was watching the beach in the hope of seeing at least Saro come in sight, a man and a boy about two years younger than himself appeared. He was a small man, with short, fat legs under a protruding stomach, a round face and pointed nose confined by pince-nez. He looked like a civil servant or professor. The boy was thin and pale, in a suit too big for him, and was hugging a large and evidently new leather ball to his chest. Holding his son by the hand, the man came up to Agostino and looked at him doubtfully for some time. At last he asked if it was possible to go for a row.

"Of course," replied Agostino, without hesitation.

The man considered him rather suspiciously over the top of his glasses, then asked how much it would cost to go out for an hour on a bathing raft. Agostino knew the prices and told him. Then he realized that the man had mistaken him for the bath man's son or for one of his boys, and that somehow flattered him. "Very well," said the man, "we will go."

Agostino didn't need telling twice. He at once took the rough pine log which served as roller, and placed it under the prow of the boat. Then, grasping the ends of the two floats in both hands, his strength redoubled by this singular spur to his pride, he pushed the raft into the water. He helped the boy and his father to get on, sprang after them and seized the oars.

For a while Agostino rowed without speaking. At that early hour the sea was quite empty. The boy hugged his ball to his chest and kept his pale eyes fixed on Agostino. The man sat awkwardly, with knees apart to make room for his paunch. He kept turning his fat neck to look about him, and seemed to be enjoying the outing. At last he asked Agostino who he was, the bath man's son, or employed by him. Agostino replied that he was employed by him. "And how old are you?" asked the man.

"Thirteen," replied Agostino.

"There," said the man, turning to his son, "this boy is almost the same age as you, and he's already at work." Then to Agostino: "And do you go to school?"

"I should like to, but how can I, sir?" he answered, assuming the hypocritical tone which he had heard the boys put on when asked a question like that. "We've got to live, sir."

"There, you see," said the father to his son. "This boy can't go to school because he has to work, and you have the face to make a fuss about your lessons."

"There's a lot of us in the family," said Agostino, rowing vigorously, "and we all work."

"And how much can you earn a day?" asked the man.

"It depends," replied Agostino. "If many people come, about twenty or thirty lire."

"Which of course you give to your father," interposed the man.

"Of course," replied Agostino, without a moment's hesitation, "except what I make in tips."

This time the man didn't think it necessary to point him out as an example to his son, but he nodded his head approvingly. His son said nothing, but hugged his ball still closer and kept his pale, watery eyes fixed on Agostino. "Would you like to have a leather ball like that, boy?" the man suddenly asked Agostino. Now Agostino had two identical balls, which had been lying about for a long time in his room with his other toys. But he said: "Of course I should, but how am I to get one? We have to buy necessities first." The man turned to his son and said to him, probably half in fun: "There now, Peter, give your ball to this boy who hasn't got one." The boy looked first at his father and then at Agostino, and greedily hugged his ball tighter; but still he didn't say a word. "Don't you want to?" asked his father gently. "Don't you want to?"

"It's my ball," said the boy.

"Yes, it's yours, but if you like you may give it away," persisted the father. "This poor boy has never had one in all his life; now, don't you want to give it up to him?"

"No," said his son emphatically.

"Never mind," interposed Agostino at this point, with a sanctimonious smile, "I don't really want it. I shouldn't have time to play with it . . . it's different for him."

The father smiled at these words, pleased at having found such a useful object lesson for his son. "He's a better boy than you," he went on, stroking his son's head. "He's poor, but he doesn't want to take away your ball, he leaves it to you; but whenever you want to grumble and make a fuss, I hope you'll remember that there are lots of boys like this in the world, who have to work, and who have never had balls or any toys of their own."

"It's my ball," repeated the boy obstinately.

"Yes, it's yours," sighed his father, absent-mindedly. He looked at his watch and said in a tone of command: "It's time we went back; take us in, boy." Without a word Agostino turned the prow towards the beach.

As they approached the shore he saw Saro standing in the water watching his maneuvers attentively, and he was afraid the bath man would give him away. But Saro didn't say a word; perhaps he understood, perhaps he didn't care; he gravely helped Agostino pull the boat up the beach. "This is for you," said the man, giving Agostino the sum agreed on and something over. Agostino took the money and gave it to Saro. "But I'm going to keep the tip," he added, with an air of self-satisfied bravado. Saro said nothing; scarcely even smiling, he put the money inside the sash bound around his stomach and walked off slowly across the beach to his hut.

This little incident gave Agostino a definite feeling of not belonging any more to the world in which boys of that sort existed, and by now he had got so used to living with the poor that the hypocrisy of any other kind of life bored him. At the same time he felt regretfully that he wasn't really like the boys of the gang. He was still much too sensitive. If he had really been one of them, he thought sometimes, he would not have suffered so much from their coarse and clumsy

jokes. So it seemed that he had lost his first estate without having succeeded in winning another.

ONE DAY, TOWARDS THE END of the summer, Agostino went with the boys to the pine woods to chase birds and look for mushrooms. This was what he enjoyed most of all their exploits. They entered the forest and walked for miles upon its soft soil along natural aisles, between the red pillars of the tree trunks, looking up in the sky to see if somewhere between those tall trunks there was anything moving among the pine needles. Then Berto or Tortima or Sandro, who was the most skillful of all, would stretch the elastic of his slingshot and aim a sharp stone in the direction they thought they had seen a movement. Sometimes a sparrow with a broken wing would come hurtling down, and go fluttering lamely along with pitiful little chirps till one of the boys seized it and twisted its neck between his fingers. But more often the chase was fruitless, and the boys would go wandering on deeper and deeper into the forest, their heads thrown back and their eyes fixed on some point far above them; going ever farther and farther till at last the undergrowth began and a tangle of thorny bushes took the place of bare, soft soil covered with dry husks. And with the undergrowth began their hunt for fungi. It had been raining for a day or two and the leaves of the undergrowth were still glistening with wet, and the ground was damp and covered with fresh green shoots. In the thick of the bushes . . . there were the yellow fungi, glittering with moisture; sometimes magnificent single ones, sometimes families of little ones. The boys put their fingers through the brambles and picked them delicately, holding the head between two fingers and taking care to bring the stalk away too, with earth and moss still clinging to it. Then they threaded them on long, pointed sprigs of broom.

Wandering thus from patch to patch of undergrowth, they would collect several kilos for Tortima's dinner, for he, being the strongest, confiscated their finds. That day their harvest had been a rich one, for after wandering about a good deal they had found some virgin undergrowth where the fungi were growing closely packed together in their bed of moss. It was getting late before they had even half-explored this undergrowth; so they began to tramp slowly homeward, with several long spits laden with fungi and two or three birds.

They generally followed a path which led straight down to the shore; but this evening they were led farther in pursuit of a teasing sparrow which kept fluttering along among the boughs and continually gave the illusion of being just within reach, so that they ended by walking the whole length of the forest, which to the east came to an end just behind the town. It was dusk as they emerged from the last pine trees on to the piazza of a remote suburb, with rubbish heaps and thistles and broom scattered about and a few ill-defined paths winding over it. Stunted oleanders grew at intervals around the edge; there were no pavements, and the dusty gardens of the few little villas which bordered it alternated with waste ground enclosed by bits of fencing. These little villas were placed at intervals all round the piazza and the wide expanse of sky over the great square added to the impression of loneliness and squalor.

The boys cut diagonally across the piazza, walking two and two like a religious order. At the end of the procession came Tortima and Agostino. Agostino was carrying two long spits of fungi and Tortima held a couple of sparrows in his great hands, their bloody heads dangling.

When they had reached the far end of the piazza Tortima nudged Agostino with his elbow and, pointing to one of the little villas, said cheerfully: "Do you see that? Do you know what that is?"

Agostino looked. The villa was very like all the others; a little bigger perhaps, with three stories and a sloping slate roof. Its façade was gloomy and smoke-

grimed, with white shutters tightly closed; while the dense trees in the garden almost hid it from view. The garden did not look very big; the wall around it was covered with ivy, and through the gate one could see a short path with bushes on either side, and a double-paneled door under an old-fashioned porch. "There's no one there," said Agostino, stopping.

"No one, eh?" laughed the other; and he explained to Agostino in a few words who it was lived there. Agostino had several times heard the boys talking about houses where women lived alone, and how they shut themselves in all day, and at night were ready to welcome anyone who came, in return for money; but he had never seen one of these houses before. Tortima's words roused in him to the full the sense of strangeness and bewilderment which he had felt when first he heard them discussing it. And now as then he could hardly believe that there really existed a community so singular in its generosity as to dispense impartially to all that love which seemed to him so far away and so hard to come by; so he now looked with incredulous eyes on the little villa, as if he hoped to read on its walls some trace of the incredible life that went on inside it.

Compared with his imaginary picture of rooms on each of which a naked woman shed her radiance, the house looked singularly old and grimy. "Oh yes," he said, with pretended indifference, but his heart had already begun to beat faster.

"Yes," said Tortima, "it's the most expensive in the town." And he added a number of details about the place and the number of women, the people who went there and the time you were allowed to stay. This information was almost displeasing to Agostino, substituting as it did sordid details for the confused, barbaric image he had formed when he first heard tell of these forbidden places. But assuming a tone of idle curiosity he put a great many questions to his companion. For, after the first moment of surprise and disappointment, an idea had suddenly sprung up in his mind and soon laid fast hold of him. Tortima, who seemed to be well informed, gave him all the informa-

tion he needed. Deep in conversation they crossed the piazza and joined the others on the esplanade. It was now almost dark and the party broke up. Agostino gave his fungi to Tortima and started home.

The idea which had come to him was clear and simple enough, however complicated and obscure its origin. He had made up his mind to go to that villa this very night and sleep with one of the women. This was not just a vague desire, it was an absolutely firm, almost desperate resolution. He felt that this was the only way he could escape from the obsession that had caused him such intense suffering all that summer. If he could only possess one of those women, he said to himself, it would forever prove the boys' calumny to have been ridiculous, and at the same time sever the thin thread of perverted and troubled sensuality which still bound him to his mother. Though he did not confess it to himself, his most urgent aim was to feel himself forever independent of his mother's love. A simple but significant fact had convinced him of this necessity, only that very day.

Up to now he and his mother had slept in separate rooms; but that night a friend of his mother's was arriving to spend a week with them. As the house was small it had been arranged that their guest should have Agostino's room, while a cot was to be made up for him in his mother's room. That very morning he had been disgusted to see the cot set up beside his mother's, which was still unmade and covered with bed-clothes. His clothing and books and washing things had been carried in with the cot.

The fact of sleeping together only made Agostino hate still more that promiscuity with his mother which was already so hateful to him. He thought this new and still closer intimacy must suddenly reveal to him, without hope of escape, all that up to now he had only dimly suspected. Quickly, quickly he must find an antidote, and set up between his mother and himself the image of another woman to whom he could turn his thoughts if not his eyes. And the image which was to screen him from his mother's nakedness, and which would restore her dignity by removing her femininity

... one of those women in the villa on the piazza was to supply that image.

How he was to get himself received in that house and how he would choose the woman and go off with her were matters to which Agostino did not give a thought—indeed, even if he had wanted to, he would never have been able to picture it. In spite of Tortima's information, the house and its inmates and everything belonging to it were surrounded by a dense atmosphere of improbability, as if one were not dealing with reality but with the most daring hypothesis which might at the last moment prove fallacious. The success of his undertaking depended on a logical calculation; if there was a house, then there were women too, and if there were women there was the possibility of meeting one of them. But it was not quite clear to him that the house and the women really were there; and this was not so much because he doubted Tortima's word as because he was totally lacking in terms of comparison. Nothing he had ever done or seen bore the faintest resemblance to what he was about to undertake. Like a poor savage who has heard about the palaces of Europe, and can only picture them as a slightly larger version of his own thatched hut, so he, in trying to picture those women and their caresses, could only think, with slight variations, of his mother; the love making could only be conjecture and vague desire.

But, as so often happens, his very inexperience led him to busy himself with practical aspects of the question, as if once these were settled he could also solve its complex unreality. He was particularly worried by the question of money. Tortima had explained to him in great detail exactly how much he would have to pay and to whom; and yet he could not quite grasp it. What was the relation between money, which is generally used for acquiring quite definite objects with recognizable qualities, and a woman's caresses, a woman's naked flesh? Was there really a price, and was that price really fixed, and not different in each particular case? The idea of giving money in exchange for that shameful and forbidden pleasure seemed to

him cruel and strange, an insult which the giver might find pleasant but which must be painful for the one who received it. Was it really true that he would have to pay the money directly to the woman, and in her very presence? He somehow felt he ought to hide it and leave her with the illusion of a disinterested relationship. And then, wasn't the sum Tortima had mentioned too small? No money would be enough, he thought, to pay for such an experience . . . the end of one period of his life and the beginning of another.

Faced with these doubts he decided to keep strictly to what Tortima had told him, even if it turned out to be false, for he had nothing else on which to base his plan of action. He had found out from his friend how much it cost to visit the villa, and the figure did not seem higher than the amount he had been saving for a long time in his terra-cotta money box. With the small coins and paper money it contained he must surely be able to get the amount together, and it might even prove to be more. His plan was to take the money out of the money box, then wait till his mother had gone to the station to meet her friend, when he would go out in his turn, fetch Tortima and set off with him to the villa. He must have enough money for Tortima too, for he knew him to be poor and certainly not in the least disposed to do him a favor unless he was going to get something out of it himself.

This was his plan, and though it still seemed to him desperately remote and improbable he resolved to prepare for it with the same care and certainty as if it had only been an outing in a boat or some expedition into the pine woods.

EAGER AND EXCITED, freed for the first time from the poison of remorse and impotence, he almost ran all the way home from the distant piazza. The front door was locked, but the French windows of the drawing room stood open, and through them came the sound of

music. His mother was at the piano. He went in; the two subdued lights over the piano lit up her face while the rest of the room was in darkness. His mother was sitting on the piano stool, and beside her, on another, sat the young man of the raft. It was the first time that Agostino had seen him in their house, and a sudden presentiment took his breath away. His mother seemed to divine his presence, for she turned her head with a calm gesture of unconscious coquetry, a coquetry of which Agostino felt the young man to be the object rather than himself. She at once stopped playing when she saw him, and called him to her. "Agostino, what do you mean by coming in at this hour? Come here."

He went slowly up to the piano, full of revolt and embarrassment. His mother drew him to her and put her arm around him. He noticed that his mother's eyes were extraordinarily bright and young and sparkling. Laughter seemed to be on the brink of bubbling up through her lips, making her teeth glitter. She quite frightened him by the impetuosity, almost violence, with which she drew him to her, as if she were trembling with joy. He was sure that these manifestations had nothing to do with him personally. And they reminded him strangely of his own excitement of a few minutes before, as he ran through the streets in his eagerness to fetch his savings and go with Tortima to the villa and possess a woman.

"Where have you been?" his mother went on, in a voice which was at once tender, cruel and gay. "Where have you been all this time, you naughty boy?" Agostino made no reply; he did not feel his mother really expected one. That was just how she sometimes spoke to the cat. The young man was leaning forward, clasping his knees with both hands, his cigarette between two fingers, and gazing at his mother with eyes as sparkling and smiling as her own. "Where have you been?" repeated his mother. "How naughty of you to play truant like that." She rumpled up his hair on his forehead and then smoothed it again with her warm, slender hand, with a tender but irresistible violent caress. "Isn't he a handsome boy?" she said proudly, turning to the young man.

"As handsome as his mother," the young man replied. She smiled pathetically at this simple compliment. Full of shame and irritation, Agostino made an effort to free himself from her embrace. "Go and wash yourself," said his mother, "and make haste, because we are soon going in to supper." Agostino bowed slightly to the young man and left the room. Behind him, he immediately heard the music taken up again at the very point where he had interrupted it.

But once in the passage he stood still and listened to the sounds his mother's fingers were drawing from the keys. The passage was dark, and at the end of it he could see through the open door into the brightly lit kitchen, where the cook, dressed in white, was bustling about between the table and the kitchen range. His mother went on playing, and the music sounded to Agostino gay, tumultuous, sparkling, exactly like the expression in her eyes while she held him to her side. Perhaps that really was the character of the music, or perhaps his mother read into it some of her own fire and sparkle and vivacity. The whole house resounded to the music, and Agostino found himself thinking that out in the road lots of people must be stopping to listen, wondering at the scandalous wantonness which seemed to pour from every note.

Then, all at once, in the middle of a chord, the sounds stopped, and Agostino was convinced—he could not have told how—that the passion which had found expression in the music had suddenly found another outlet. He took two steps forward, and stood still on the threshold of the drawing room. What he saw did not much surprise him. The young man was standing up, and kissing his mother on the lips. She was bending backward over the low stool, which was too small to hold her body; one hand was still on the keyboard and the other was round the young man's neck. Even in the dim light he could see how her body was arched as it fell backward, with her chest thrust forward, one leg folded behind her, and the other stretched out toward the pedal. In contrast to her attitude of passionate surrender, the young man preserved his usual easy and graceful carriage. As he stood, he held one

arm round the woman's neck, but apparently more from fear lest she might fall over than from any deep emotion. His other arm hung at his side and he still had a cigarette between his fingers. His white-trousered legs, planted far apart, expressed deliberation and complete mastery of the situation.

The kiss lasted a long time and it seemed to Agostino that whenever the young man wanted to interrupt it his mother clung to his lips more insatiably than ever. He really could not help feeling that she was hungry . . . famished for that kiss, like someone who has been starved too long. Then, at a casual movement of her hand two or three solemn, sweet notes sounded in the room. Suddenly they sprang apart. Agostino took a step forward and said: "Mamma." The young man wheeled about, and standing with his legs apart and his hands in his pockets, pretended to look out the window.

"Agostino!" said his mother.

Agostino went to her. She was breathing so violently that he could distinctly see her breasts rising and falling through her silk dress. Her eyes were brighter than ever, her mouth was half-open, her hair in disorder; and one soft, pointed lock, like a live snake, hung against her cheek.

"What is it, Agostino?" she repeated, in a low, broken voice, doing her best to arrange her hair. Agostino felt a sudden oppression of pity mingled with distaste. He would have liked to cry out to her: "Calm yourself, don't pant like that . . . don't speak to me in that voice." But instead, he put on a childish voice and said, with exaggerated eagerness: "Mamma, can I break open my money box? I want to buy a book."

"Yes, dear," she answered, putting out a hand to stroke his brow. At the touch of her hand Agostino could not help starting back. His movement was so slight as to be almost imperceptible, but to him it seemed so violent that he felt every one must notice it. "Very well then, I'll break it," he said. And he left the room quickly, without waiting for a reply. The sand on the stairs made a gritty sound as he ran up to his room. The idea of the money box had really only been

a pretext; the fact was he didn't know what to say when he saw his mother looking like that. It was dark in his room; the money box was on a table at the far end. Through the open window a street lamp lit up its pink belly and great black smiling mouth. He turned on the light, picked up the money box and flung it on the ground with an almost hysterical violence. It broke at once and from the wide opening poured a quantity of money of every description. There were several notes mixed with the coins. He went on hands and knees and frantically counted the money. His fingers were trembling and, while he counted, the image of those two down in the drawing room kept getting mixed up with the money that was lying scattered over the floor—his mother, hanging backwards over the piano stool, and the young man bending over her. But when he had finished counting he discovered that the money did not amount to the sum he needed.

What was he to do? It flashed through his mind that he might take it from his mother, for he knew where she kept it, and nothing would have been easier; but this idea revolted him and he decided simply to ask her for it. But what excuse could he make? He suddenly thought of one, but at that moment he heard the gong sounding for supper. He hastily hid his treasure in a drawer and went downstairs.

His mother was already at table. The window was wide open and great velvety moths flew in from the courtyard and beat their wings against the white lampshade. The young man had gone and his mother had again assumed her usual dignified serenity. Agostino, as he looked at her, wondered why her mouth bore no trace of the kisses which had been pressed on it a few minutes before, just as he had wondered that first time, when she went out on the raft with the young man. He could not have defined what feelings this thought awoke in him. A sense of pity for his mother, to whom that kiss seemed to be so disturbing and so precious; and at the same time a strong feeling of repulsion, not so much for what he had seen as for the memory which remained with him. He would have liked to expel that memory, to forget it altogether.

How was it possible that such troublous and changing impressions could enter through one's eyes? He foresaw that the sight would be forever stamped on his memory.

When they had finished, his mother rose from the table and went upstairs. Agostino thought he would never find such an opportune moment to ask for the money. He followed her up and went into her room with her. His mother sat down at the dressing-table and silently studied her face in the glass.

"Mamma," said Agostino.

"What is it?" she asked absentmindedly.

"I want twenty lire."

"What for?"

"To buy a book."

"But didn't you say you were going to break open your money box?" asked his mother, gently passing the powder puff over her face.

Agostino purposely made a childish excuse.

"Yes, but if I break it I shan't have any money left. I want to buy a book without opening my money box."

His mother laughed fondly. "What a baby you are." She studied herself a moment more in the glass, then she said: "You'll find my purse in the bag on my bed. Take out twenty lire, and put the purse back again." Agostino went to the bed, opened the bag, took out the purse and took twenty lire from it. Then clutching the two notes in his hand he flung himself on the cot beside his mother's. She had finished her make-up and came over to him. "What are you going to do now?" "I'm going to read this book," he said, taking a book of adventures at random from the bed table, and opening it at an illustration.

"Very well, but remember before you go to sleep to put out the light." His mother was still moving about the room, doing one thing and another. Agostino lay watching her, with his head pillowed on his arm. He obscurely felt that she had never been so beautiful as on that evening. Her dress of glossy white silk showed off brilliantly her brown coloring and the rich rose of her complexion. By an unconscious reflowering of her former character she seemed to have recovered all the

sweet, majestic serenity of bearing she used to have; but with an indefinable breath of happiness. She was tall, but Agostino had never seen her look so imposing before. Her presence seemed to fill the room. White in the shadow of the room, she moved majestically about, with head erect on her beautiful neck, her black eyes calm and concentrated under her smooth brow. Then she put out all the lights except the bed table, and bent down to kiss her son. Agostino drank in again the perfume he knew so well, and as he touched her neck with his lips he could not help wondering if those women . . . out there in the villa . . . would be as beautiful and smell as sweet.

Left alone, Agostino waited about ten minutes to give his mother time to have gone. Then he got up from the cot, put out the light, and tiptoed into the next room. He felt about in the dark for the table by the window, opened the drawer and filled his pockets with coins and notes. He felt with his hand in every corner of the drawer to see if it was really empty, and left the room.

When he was on the road he began to run. Tortima lived at the other end of the town, in the caulkers' and sailors' quarter, and though the town was small he had a long way to go. He chose the dark alleys bordering on the pine woods, and walking fast and occasionally running, he went straight ahead until he saw, appearing between the houses, the masts of the sailboats in the dry dock. Tortima's house was just above the dock, beyond the movable iron bridge which spanned the canal leading to the harbor. By day this was a forgotten, dilapidated spot with tumble-down warehouses and ships bordering its wide, deserted, sun-baked quays, pervaded by the smell of fish and tar, with green, oily water, motionless cranes and barges laden with shingle. But now the night made it like every other part of the town, and only a ship whose bulging sides and masts overhung the footpath, revealed the presence of the harbor water lying deep in between the houses. Agostino crossed the bridge and headed toward a row of houses on the opposite side of the canal. Here and there a street lamp irregularly lit the

walls of these little houses. Agostino stopped in front of an open lighted window, from which came the sounds of voices and clatter of plates, as if they were having a meal. Putting his fingers to his mouth he gave one loud and two soft whistles, which was the signal agreed upon between the boys of the gang. Almost at once someone appeared at the window. "It's me, it's Pisa," said Agostino, in a low, timid voice. "I'm coming," answered Tortima. He came down, still eating his last mouthful, red in the face from the wine he had been drinking. "I've come to go to that villa," said Agostino. "I've got the money . . . enough for both of us." Tortima swallowed hard and looked at him. "That villa the other side of the piazza," Agostino repeated. "Where the women are."

"Ah," said Tortima, understanding at last. "You've been thinking it over. Bravo, Pisa. I'll be with you in a moment." He ran off and Agostino walked up and down, waiting for him, his eyes fixed on Tortima's window. He was kept waiting a long time, but at last Tortima reappeared. Agostino scarcely recognized him. He had always seen him as a big boy with trousers tucked up, or half-naked on the beach and in the sea. Now he saw before him a young working man in dark holiday clothes: long trousers, waistcoat, collar and tie. He looked older too, because of the brilliantine with which he had plastered down his usually unruly hair; and his spruce, ordinary clothes brought out for the first time something ridiculous and vulgar in his appearance.

"Shall we go now?" said Tortima as he joined him.

"But is it time yet?" asked Agostino, hurrying along beside him as they crossed the bridge.

"It's always time there," said Tortima with a laugh.

They took a different road than the one Agostino had come by. The piazza was not far away, only about two turnings further on. "But have you been there before?" asked Agostino again.

"Not to that one."

Tortima did not seem to be in any hurry and kept his usual pace. "They'll hardly have finished supper

and there'll be no one there," he explained. "It's a good moment."

"Why?" asked Agostino.

"Why, don't you see, we can choose the one we like best."

"But how many are there?"

"Oh, about four or five."

Agostino longed to ask if they were pretty, but refrained. "What do we have to do?" he asked. Tortima had already told him, but the sense of unreality was so strong in him that he felt the need of hearing it reaffirmed.

"What does one do?" said Tortima. "Nothing simpler. You go in . . . they come and show themselves . . . you say: 'Good evening, ladies,' you pretend to talk for a bit, so as to give yourself the time to look them well over . . . then you choose one. It's your first time, eh?"

"Well," began Agostino rather shamefacedly. "Go along!" said Tortima brutally. "You're not going to tell me it isn't the first time. Tell that to the others, if you like, but not to me. But don't be afraid. She does it all for you. Leave it to her."

Agostino said nothing. The image evoked by Tortima of the woman initiating him into love pleased him . . . it had something maternal about it. But in spite of these facts he still remained incredulous. "But—but do you think they'll want *me*?" he asked, standing still suddenly and looking down at his bare legs.

The question seemed to embarrass Tortima for a moment. "Let's go on," he said, with feigned self-assurance. "Once there, we'll manage to get you in."

They came through a narrow lane to the piazza. The whole of it was in darkness, except for one corner where a street lamp shone peacefully down on a stretch of uneven sandy earth. In the sky above the piazza the crescent moon hung red and smoky, cut in two by a thin filament of mist. Where the darkness was thickest Agostino recognized the villa by its white shutters. They were closed, and no ray of light showed through them. Tortima, without hesitation, crossed

over to the villa. But in the middle of the piazza, under the crescent moon, he said to Agostino: "Give me the money, I'd better keep it."

"But I . . ." began Agostino, who did not quite trust Tortima. "Are you going to give it me or not?" persisted Tortima harshly. Agostino was ashamed of all that small change, but he obeyed and emptied his pockets into Tortima's hands. "Now keep your mouth shut, and come along with me," said his companion.

As they came near to the villa, the darkness grew less dense, and they could see the two gateposts, the garden path and the front door under the porch. The gate was not locked, and Tortima pushed it open and entered the garden. The front door was ajar. Tortima climbed the steps and went in, motioning to Agostino not to make a sound. Agostino, looking curiously about him, saw a quite empty hall, at the end of which was a double door, with brightly lit panes of red and blue glass. Their entrance was the signal for a ringing of bells, and almost immediately the massive shadow of someone seated behind the glass door rose against the glass, and a woman appeared in the doorway. She was a kind of servant, middle-aged and very stout, with a capacious bosom, dressed in black with a white apron tied round her waist. She came forward, sticking out her stomach, and with her arms hanging down. She had a swollen face and sulky eyes which looked out suspiciously from under a mass of hair.

"Here we are," said Tortima. Agostino saw from his voice and manner that even he, who was usually so bold, felt intimidated.

The woman scrutinized them hostilely for a moment; then she made a sign, as if inviting Tortima to pass inside. Tortima smiled with renewed assurance, and hastened toward the glass door. Agostino made as if to follow him. "Not you," said the woman, putting her hand on his shoulder.

"What!" cried Agostino, at once losing all his fear. "Why him and not me?"

"You've really neither of you any business to be here," said the woman firmly; "but he will just pass, you won't."

"You're too little, Pisa," said Tortima mockingly. And he pushed the door open and disappeared. His stunted shadow stood out for a moment against the panes of glass; then it vanished in the brilliant light.

"But what about me?" insisted Agostino, exasperated by Tortima's treachery.

"You get off, boy, go away home," said the woman. She went to the front door, opened it wide, and found herself face to face with two men who were just coming in. "Good evening . . . good evening," said the first, who had a red, jolly face. "We're agreed, eh?" he added, turning to his companion, a pale, thin young man. "If Pina's free, I'm to have her . . . and no nonsense about it."

"Agreed," said the other.

"What's this little fellow doing here?" the jovial man asked the woman, pointing to Agostino.

"He wanted to come in," said the woman. A flattering smile framed itself on her lips.

"So you wanted to go in, did you?" cried the man, turning to Agostino. "At your age, home's the place at this hour. Home with you," he cried again, waving his arms.

"That's what I told him," the woman said.

"Suppose we let him come in?" remarked the young man. "At his age I was making love to the maid."

"Well, I'm blest! Get away home . . . home . . . *home,*" shouted the other, scandalized. Followed by the fair man he entered the folding door, which banged-to behind him. Agostino, hardly knowing how he got there, found himself outside in the garden.

How badly it had all turned out; he had been betrayed by Tortima, who had taken his money, and he himself had been thrown out. Not knowing what to do, he went up the garden path, looking back all the time at the half-open door, the porch, the façade with its white shutters closed. He felt a burning sense of disappointment, especially on account of those two men who had treated him like a child. The laughter of the jovial man, the cold, experimental benevolence of his companion, seemed to him no less humiliating than the dull hostility of the woman. Still walking backward,

and looking round at the trees and shrubs in the garden, he made his way to the gate. Then he noticed that the left side of the villa was illuminated by a strong light coming from an open window on the ground floor. It occurred to him that he might at least have a glimpse of the inside of the villa through that window; and making as little noise as possible he went towards the light.

It was a window open wide on the ground floor. The windowsill was not high; very quietly, and keeping to the corner where there was less chance of his being seen, he went up to the window and looked in.

The room was small and brilliantly lighted. The walls were papered with a handsome design of large green and black flowers. Facing the window a red curtain, hanging on wooden rings from a brass rod, seemed to conceal a door. There was no furniture visible, but someone was sitting in a corner by the window for he could see crossed legs with yellow shoes stretched out into the room. Agostino thought they must belong to someone lying in an armchair. Disappointed at not seeing more, he was going to leave his post when the curtain was raised and a woman appeared.

She had on a full gown of pale blue chiffon which reminded Agostino of his mother's nightgown. It was transparent and reached to her feet; looking at her long, pale limbs through that veil was almost like seeing them float indolently in clear sea water. By a vagary of design the neck of her gown was cut in an oval reaching almost to her waist; and from it her firm, full breasts seemed to be struggling to escape, so closely were they pressed together by the dress, which was gathered round them into the neck with many fine pleats. Her wavy brown hair hung loosely on her shoulders; she had a large flat, pale face, at once childish and vicious, and there was a whimsical expression in her tired eyes and mouth, with its full, painted lips. She came through the curtain with her hands behind her back and her bosom thrust forward, saying nothing and standing quietly, in an expectant attitude. She looked at the corner where the man with

the crossed legs was lounging; then, silently as she had come, she turned and disappeared, leaving the curtain wide open. At the same time the man's legs vanished from the sight of Agostino. He heard someone get up and withdrew from the window in alarm.

He returned to the path, pushed the garden gate open, and came out on the piazza. He felt a keen sense of disappointment at the failure of his attempt, and at the same time a feeling almost of terror at what awaited him in days to come. Nothing had happened, he had not possessed any woman. Tortima had gone off with all his money, and tomorrow the same old jokes would begin again and the torment of his relations with his mother. Years and years of emptiness and frustration lay between him and that act of liberation. Meanwhile he had to go on living just as before, and his whole soul rebelled at the bitter thought that what he had hoped for had become a definite impossibility. When he got home, he went in without making any noise; he saw the visitor's luggage in the hall and heard voices in the sitting room. He went upstairs and flung himself on the cot in his mother's room. He tore off his clothes in the dark, and throwing them on the floor got into bed naked between the sheets. . . .

After a little he became drowsy and at last fell asleep. Suddenly he woke with a start. The lamp was lit and shone on his mother's back. She was in her nightgown and with one knee on the bed was just going to get in. "Mamma," he said suddenly, in a loud, almost violent voice.

His mother came over to him. "What is it?" she asked. "What is it, darling?" Her nightgown was transparent, like the woman's at the villa; the lines and vague shadows of her body were visible, like those of that other body. "I want to go away tomorrow," said Agostino, in the same loud, exasperated voice, trying to look not at his mother's body but at her face.

His mother sat down on the bed and looked at him in surprise. "But why? . . . What is the matter? Aren't you happy here?"

"I want to go away tomorrow," he repeated.

"Let us see," said his mother, passing her hand

gently over his forehead, as if she were afraid he was feverish. "What is it? Aren't you well? Why do you want to go away?"

His mother's nightgown reminded him so much of the dress of that woman at the villa: the same transparency, the same pale, indolent, acquiescent flesh; only the nightgown was creased, which made this picture even more intimate and secret. And so, thought Agostino, not only did the image of that woman not interpose itself as a screen between him and his mother, as he had hoped, but it actually seemed to confirm the latter's femininity. "Why do you want to go away?" she asked again. "Don't you like being with me?"

"You always treat me like a child," said Agostino abruptly, without knowing why.

His mother laughed and stroked his cheek. "Very well, from now on I'll treat you like a man.... Will that be all right? But you must go to sleep now, it's very late." She stooped and kissed him. Then she put out the light and Agostino heard her get into bed.

"Like a man," he couldn't help thinking before he fell asleep. But he wasn't a man. What a long, unhappy time would have to pass before he could become one.

LUCA

Translated from the Italian
by Angus Davidson

LUCA HAD SPENT THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS at the usual seaside resort. Now he went back home feeling unwell, feeling, indeed, that he would soon really be sick. He had recently grown with abnormal speed, and at fifteen was already as tall as an adult, but his shoulders were still narrow and thin, and in his white face his eyes, with their too-great intensity, seemed to be consuming the thin cheeks and forehead. If he had realized the delicate state of his health and the dangers that attended it, he might have asked permission of his parents to break off his studies; but at his age, when sensitiveness is awake and consciousness still sleeping, he did not relate his weakened physical condition to the deep repugnance which his studies aroused in him. He had always gone to school and it seemed natural to go on doing so—even if the things he had to learn did not present themselves in orderly fashion according to the days and months of the scholastic year but heaped in front of him in a steep, insurmountable mass, like a mountain whose smooth sides offer the climber no hold for hand or foot. His will was not lacking, but rather some physical impulse; some fortitude of the body which he could not identify. Sometimes his body seemed to give way beneath him, as an exhausted horse, dull-eyed with fatigue, gives way beneath the rider who vainly spurs it on.

Often, however, this body of his rebelled when Luca least expected it—not so much before heavy tasks as for reasons of no importance. And then Luca was subject to sudden, furious rages during which his body, already so exhausted, seemed to burn up the little strength it still retained in paroxysms of hatred and revolt. More than anything it was the dumb, inert resistance of inanimate objects, or rather, his own in-

capacity to make use of such objects without fatigue or injury that threw him into these devastating rages. A tight or badly laced shoe into which he could not easily fit his foot; a school-bound streetcar, barely missed after a long chase; a bottle of ink upset on his exercise book, forcing him to recopy an entire page; the unforeseen, painful impact of his head against the sharp corner of his desk as he raised himself after picking up a fallen book; these and other absurdities were enough to put him beside himself with rage. He would either curse and grind his teeth, sometimes going so far as to childishly bang the corner of the desk with his fist or hurl the inkpot on the floor, or he would burst into violent weeping in which some vast and ancient grief seemed to be pouring itself out. He felt that the world was hostile to him, and he to the world; he felt he was waging continuous, nerve-racking warfare against everything around him.

This revolt of inanimate objects, this incapacity on his part to love and to dominate them, had reached a climax during the summer at the seaside. One particular incident had proved once and for all the state of reciprocal enmity between himself and the world of reality. Luca was a clever mechanic, and when anything went wrong with the electricity in the house he was asked to help. One evening there was a short circuit and the lights went out. Luca, at the sound of his mother's voice calling to him through the dark rooms, was quickly on the scene with his tools. But, whether he had failed to take the precaution of not touching the ground or whether by the dim light of the candle he had not noticed that the wires were touching, the electric current suddenly sprayed and crackled between his fingers and ran through his body. Luca started shouting, and at the same time involuntarily tightened his grip on the wiring, thus intensifying the shock, which in turn made him powerless to loosen his hold on the wire. His mother, terrified and not knowing what to do, hovered around him, while Luca yelled and the electric current continued to vibrate through his body with a malignant power which seemed to

come, not from the wires, but from the whole mysterious, hostile world which—although he had no knowledge of it—he hated. At last, after a long interval of confusion, somebody turned off the current at the main switch, and Luca, his hands released, threw himself sobbing into his mother's arms. She did not understand why he was crying in such despair and hugged him mechanically, stroking his head. For a long time Luca continued to weep, his whole body trembling, at the same time feeling bitterly that his mother's caresses no longer protected and comforted him as they had once done. Later, when the lights were on again, it was discovered that the electric shock had caused deep burns in the tips of three of his fingers. The imprint of the wires and, so to speak, of the electricity itself, was clearly visible in a mark which had the jagged shape of a minute flash of lightning.

Another storm of rage came upon him in the train, shortly before he arrived home from his summer holiday. They had risen early and eaten a hasty breakfast in the dismantled house, among trunks and suitcases. As he was swallowing a cup of cheap milk colored with coffee substitute, his mother had said: "Have a good breakfast, because lunch in the dining car is always so late." The idea of lunch in a dining car had immediately delighted him, for he had never been in one. It would be a real pleasure to sit and eat at one of those tiny tables he had sometimes glimpsed from the window of another train. He imagined that the bread and soup and meat would have a quite different taste when eaten at a real little table, with real knives and forks and plates handed by waiters, the landscape meanwhile slipping past one's eyes as the train proceeded on its way. Besides, Luca was extremely sensitive about the opinion of other people and about the formalities of decorous behaviour. He had a wholehearted loathing of meals eaten on one's knee in a railway carriage, among dirty pieces of paper and fruit peelings and leftovers, with cold, greasy food squashed between the two halves of a gaping roll of bread. During such meals there was always somebody wait-

ing to go to the dining car who would look on with an air of self-satisfaction and disgust at the family crouching over paper bags. On their journey to the seaside there had been such a witness, a scornful, well-dressed old lady. Luca had found himself ashamed to eat, and at the same time ashamed of being ashamed. Overcome by these humiliating feelings, he had scarcely touched his food.

The idea of not having to unwrap greasy bits of paper and devour sandwiches had comforted him, and for a large part of the journey he sat quietly looking out at the countryside. At last the waiter came to make reservations for the dining car, and his father failed to take any tickets. Luca thought he was waiting for the second service, and went on gazing out of the window. Then he heard his father say: "After all, we can buy lunch baskets at Orvieto . . . they're much cheaper and they have much better things in them than what they give you in the dining car." His father, as he pronounced these words, showed no particular feeling; Luca felt that he made this decision, not out of meanness, but simply from good sense. Nor did it seem odd to him that his mother, always pliable in the face of any argument that favored an economy, should answer indifferently: "As you like . . . I should really have preferred to go to the dining car, even if only so as not to get my fingers sticky. . . ." It was, in fact, a case of two people coming to an agreement over a matter of no importance. And in truth the discussion went on for another two minutes, in a calm and affable manner, ending in victory for his father—a victory so gentle, in any case, as to seem more like the meeting of two kindred minds. Luca nevertheless, though he realized that the decision had not been made out of spite, flew into a violent rage.

What offended him most was that neither of them asked his opinion and that they treated him as an inanimate object, which, being a mere object, had neither preferences nor ideas, neither tastes nor wishes. At the same time he felt a profound disappointment; all the more heart-rending and catastrophic because

he had been so elated at the idea of having lunch in the dining car. But to all these resentments there was added a further one which did not seem to have any precise origin, nor to arise from this particular trouble—the usual fury that assailed him every time he became aware of revolt and insubordination on the part of things and people in opposition to his own will. This fury seemed to come from some far-off place, and it flared like a fierce fire, scorching him and shaking him from head to foot. He went white in the face, clenched his teeth tightly and shut his eyes. He felt himself grow stiff all over with the violent rage that tautened his body; for a moment he felt impelled to open the door and throw himself out of the train. This suicidal temptation did not frighten him, nor did it seem to him absurd; it was, as he realized, the natural outlet of the furious feeling of impotence that overwhelmed him. He opened his eyes and looked at his parents. As though his rage, like a fierce harsh light, had carved out their features in an altogether new manner, he seemed to be observing them for the first time—his mother fair, thin, with an angular face to which the large nose and tight mouth gave an air of authority and wisdom; his father also fair, but soft and rounded, with indefinite, good-natured features. For the first time he felt the hardness and power of his mother and the good sense and kindheartedness of his father as things that were not only external to himself but actually hostile. Things with which he could not come to any sort of an understanding; and which came from remote centers of origin over which he could exercise no kind of control. He understood, it is true, that if he had made his desire clear they would have at once welcomed it; perhaps his mother, who did not like to go back on a decision, might have opposed it, but not for long. But he realized also that he did not want at any cost to compel them to do a thing that they did not seem to have thought of; all the more because that desire of his now filled him, in turn, with a sort of rage, as being a ridiculous impulse and not worth consideration. In any case, the impor-

tant thing was not so much the question of whether he had lunch in the dining car or in the compartment as the feeling that his parents were made of the same hostile, defiant matter he was aware of in other things. And like other things, they could not, with all the love that they felt for him, be tolerated.

In spite of these reflections, his feeling of rage did not leave him, and when they stopped at Orvieto station it was with extreme repugnance that he watched his father get out of the train, buy the lunch baskets and come back, panting, to the compartment. His father carefully closed the door, pulled up the little folding table that was fixed under the window and put the three baskets upon it. Then, with the superficial and slightly mournful solicitude that was habitual with him, he asked the boy: "Luca, are you hungry? Would you like to have lunch at once or would you rather we waited a little?" Luca answered without turning his head: "I'm ready whenever you are."

The train started again; and it seemed to Luca that the sight of the countryside, as it rolled past beneath his eyes, soothed, for a moment, his resentment. But suddenly, from whence he knew not, a new wave of rage assailed him, and unable to contain himself, he got up and left the compartment. He went straight to the lavatory, banging the door furiously behind him. There was a mirror above the washbowl, and he thrust his face close to it, opening his mouth wide as though he were screaming, though in reality no sound came out of his throat. He felt he was screaming, nevertheless, noiselessly, with the whole of his quivering body. The train was rocking and swaying violently, clattering across one switch after another. Everything rattled and creaked in the narrow enclosure, the connecting framework of the carriage, the glass in the window frame, the brass rim around the glass, the tumbler in its holder, the floor where moving iron plates danced and clashed together; Luca stood there, his mouth open, with the feeling that he was screaming louder than the din of the train, while his raging fury seemed to him to be the very train itself which sooner or later

must inevitably run off the rails, hurtle down an embankment and smash itself to pieces against the side of a hill. He stayed like that for a short time, strained and rigid; then opened the door and went back to the compartment. His father had opened the lunch baskets and was putting the rolls on a newspaper spread on his knees. "There's one for you," he said, offering the first roll to Luca. He turned to his wife and added: "Would you like some wine at once? But perhaps it would be best to eat first and drink afterwards, when we have our hands free." His father spoke always in a drawling voice, as though he were making feeble proposals which he expected, resignedly, to see rejected. Luca took the roll stuffed with cold meat and bit it angrily. He had no appetite and he ate with an effort, keeping his face obstinately turned toward the window. From the compartment behind him came the rustling of paper bags being unfolded, muttered words of offering or of comment from his father, speaking with his mouth full, or from his mother, answering in monosyllables. As soon as he had finished eating he felt as if the food had stuck in his throat. His rage had not subsided, it persisted at the same level in a state of tension that was perhaps less harsh, but no less painful in its continuance.

It was as though his whole body had remained numb and his mind permanently confused. He gazed unseeing at the landscape, now the countryside of his own native city. And upon his stomach he felt the weight of the food he had eaten, like a big, tightly closed package done up in grease-proof paper, full of partly chewed bits and pieces, exactly like the paper bags full of odds and ends that housewives throw out of their windows into the alleys for the cats of the neighborhood. His mother asked him what was the matter, moving her hand across his forehead to smooth back the hair that had been blown about by the wind. And, from the relief afforded him by the contact of that cool, light hand, accompanied as it was by a feeling of nausea that filled his mouth with saliva, he realized that he was feeling sick.

When they arrived, his parents, busy getting the luggage off the train, took no notice of him. But as they were walking with the crowd along the platform, he knew suddenly that before he had gone much farther he would inevitably be sick. His feeling of nausea, very strong now, was felt in an acid taste and in an uncontrollable urge to open his mouth. They passed one carriage, then another, then a third. From each carriage people were getting out, gay and brisk, leaving behind them in the empty compartments crusts and pieces of paper, cigarette butts and bottles. Here was a fourth carriage, already empty, with all the doors wide open. And then they reached the engine with its cab full of handles and tubes and the mouth of its firebox showing red against the background of black iron. The engineer, his face smoke-stained and greasy, was looking at the people and devouring, with a hearty appetite, half a small loaf filled with what looked to Luca like a kind of green and yellow slush—a spinach omelette. At the sight of the omelette, he was conscious of an even more violent feeling of nausea, as though a current of sympathetic attraction like that between a magnet and a piece of steel had come into being between the slush that the engineer was so eagerly devouring and that other slush that was fermenting in his own stomach. Now they had reached the buffers of the engine; he leaned on one of the headlamps and vomited against the great fuming machine. He heard his mother say in a voice that seemed to him very calm: "I knew he wasn't well"; and at the same time he was conscious of a hand holding his head up. His father kept repeating, in a good-natured tone: "It's nothing . . . it's nothing." And he himself, filled with rage and with a profound grief that he did not understand, started sobbing loudly. But as they led him away, downcast and sobbing, his mother saying to him in a voice of irritation: "Why are you crying? . . . you're almost a man and yet you're crying," it seemed to him that having vomited upon the engine had been, in a way, an act of revenge against the train which had brought him back so ruthlessly to the town, to school,

to his lessons; in just the same way that his parents, ruthlessly, had refused him the dining car.

ONCE HE WAS BACK HOME, in the house where so many of his former acts of rebellion had melted away in force of habit or in boredom, his rage took on a different form, one new to him. As though it had realized the futility of violence, it transformed itself suddenly into a desire for renunciation, for resignation. It was still the same old rebellious impulse, but made expert by the defeats it had suffered, its nature changed into something secret and negative. Luca was not acquainted with the terms applicable to social warfare; if he had been, he would not have been slow to recognize, in the new form that his revolt against the world had taken, the characteristics of a strike. His body no longer grew taut in outbursts of furious destructiveness but let itself go slack, like a relaxed violin-string that looks as if it could never be tight again. Frequently, during the long afternoons that he spent at the table in his own room, he would fall asleep, for no reason, since he had slept well the night before. These were dreamless naps, black, empty, more like absences than naps. They would come upon him halfway through a printed phrase or a written page, and it was of no use for him to say: "I'll finish this piece of reading or writing, and then I'll sleep." It was all he could do to rise from the table and drag himself to his bed. No sooner had he lain down than he was asleep. When he abandoned himself to these sudden, heavy attacks of torpor, he experienced the same feeling of vindictive complacency that he had been aware of while vomiting against the engine on his return from his summer holiday. He realized that this complacency had a destructive character and that it expressed his hostility toward the world. His sleep was like a crossing of the arms, a sign of renunciation, since he had

not the strength to reject it. Formerly he would have made a desperate effort to resist these attacks of torpor; and finally, alarmed, would have told his parents about them, as he was accustomed to do whenever he thought he was sick. But now, at the back of this complacency, he seemed to detect the presence of a purpose where in the past he would have seen only a weakness. And carried along by this purpose it pleased him to shake off his former pride as a scholar, now useless and a mere encumbrance, and uncaring, to allow time to flow ruinously over a head now finally submerged. But his physical surrender was still, after all, only the vague indication of a path that he had the power either to follow or to abandon. It seemed to him that having once accepted the principle of inertia, he might as well encourage it—if only to demonstrate to himself that he was acting freely and not under compulsion. He not only refused to resist those fits of torpor and forego telling his mother and father about them, but he actually started provoking them in various ways, by deliberately reading long, dull passages or by concentrating his attention on writing exercises devoid of interest. As soon as he felt his eyes beginning to close and warming shudders running down his back, he would get up and throw himself on the bed. With his head low and his feet high, he would feel as though sleep had seized him by the hair and was sucking him down like a clinging, delicious mud, pulling him ever lower and lower. In this sinking sensation, his head seemed to be filled with an opaque, heavy substance while his feet swayed high above, light and empty. Gradually, repeating to himself: "I should be working... I should be translating... I should be reading," and thinking at the same time, complacently, that the use of the conditional implied that he would neither read, nor translate, nor do any work at all, he would fall asleep.

But sleep was merely a means to an end; he could not always be asleep and since the ultimate object continued to be a revolt against doing any lessons, Luca sought new ways of putting it into effect. This

search excited him, like an unsuspected vocation. After the afternoon classes he used to go home with extreme unwillingness, thinking with profound disgust of the hours of homework that awaited him. Now that it was a question of divesting his work of its obligatory character and of taking away from it all its importance, he found himself watching for the approach of those hours with a lively and pugnacious feeling of impatience—like a man going to accomplish a task that is in accordance with his strongest inclinations. He would come out of school, say good-bye to his companions and go slowly home, all alone, at that melancholy hour when day is dying and night is still far off. It seemed to him that everybody went out at that time, driven from indoors by the dreariness of the twilight; and it gave him pleasure to think that he, on the contrary, was headed homeward. The sky grew dark above his head as he passed through the deserted streets of the quarter in which he lived. He would enter the elevator and go up to the apartment. At that hour it was empty except for the quiet presence of the old servant in the kitchen; his father was still at the office, his mother out paying visits. Luca would go in almost secretly and, without turning on any lights, would steal through the semi-darkness of the other rooms to his own bedroom. He was conscious as he did this of a mournful feeling that he was some kind of animal, ill-adapted for life, slinking back to its lair to die in peace. In his room he would turn on the light, shut the doors and windows and sit down at the small table. He was fully conscious of what he was preparing to do, and he sat down at the table with an almost ritual solemnity; both feeling and attitude were very different from his former boredom and repulsion. He had thought out another method of avoiding his work, besides going to sleep, and in his private language he called it the "distraction exercise." This exercise consisted in reading or writing mechanically, trying at the same time, with all his might, to put himself entirely outside the things he was writing or reading.

Here, for instance, was his history book with the sentence: "Conditions in France and in Europe were now such as to permit the French government to give attention to the King of Spain's request . . ." As he read these words, Luca would force his attention away from them, isolating them in an empty absurdity. And indeed it seemed to him that the words, as he spelled them out, receded in a kind of flat, vertiginous perspective, growing progressively smaller, like the cards of letters used by oculists to test people's sight; and then, when they had almost disappeared over the horizon of that vast space to whose farthest limit they had retreated, they would leap suddenly forward in block letters, terrifying in their sound and enormous in size: "CONDITIONS IN FRANCE AND IN EUROPE WERE NOW . . ." It pleased him to discover that in these forward and backward movements the words, though they echoed in his mind syllable by syllable, remained incomprehensible, detached from all meaning, destitute of any logical framework, more dead than the words of any dead language. Sometimes, in order to make quite certain of this feeling, he would read aloud and would notice with satisfaction that the sound did not explain the words but rather added a quality of absurdity. Knowing that it needed but a slight effort of the muscles of his ears to make his voice sound detached and strange—as though issuing from some other mouth—he amused himself by repeating the same phrase in flute-like tones like a woman, or in a cavernous voice like an ogre: "Conditions in France and in Europe were now . . ." Usually this exercise ended with the customary falling asleep. He felt sleep coming to him from the feet upward, in the form of a welcome numbness in the legs; he would get up and stagger over to the bed and throw himself upon it. His eyes fixed on the table, where he could see the lamplight falling uselessly upon his abandoned books, he would allow himself to be submerged in the dark waves of sleep. He would sleep for an hour or two, then wake up and discover joyfully that there

was no time that day for any more work, and that the next day, at school, he would not know his lesson.

At school these experiments were even easier, for classes and professor had always been foreign to him and had been, even from the first, enveloped in an empty atmosphere of absurd and quite unacceptable reality. Seated at his desk in front of an open book, it was easy for him to fill his eyes and ears with a kind of soft mist through which the voice of the professor explaining the lesson was transmuted into the abstract, magical muttering of a black witch doctor echoing unintelligibly through the savage solitude of an African forest. That, thought Luca, was how the speech of the living must sound in the ears of the dead. He imagined himself to be dead, to have lost the meaning of the spoken word, to be hearing sounds that were disconnected and absurd. He knew that this process of detachment went through three phases—a first phase during which he heard and saw with normal clarity but without understanding; a second in which sounds and shapes dissolved and became confused though they still remained perceptible; and a third in which he no longer either saw or heard and in which everything was swallowed up in that silent mist. It was during one of these experiments that he suddenly heard the professor's voice asking him: "Mansi, may one know what you are thinking about?" He would have liked to answer: "I'm learning how not to think." However, all he said was: "Me? . . . about nothing." "That is obvious," remarked the professor.

Luca, in the past, had had a great deal of self-respect; and he had been among the best pupils. Now, ever since the beginning of the new term, he was among the worst. Under the rain of reprimands and bad reports he experienced a feeling of particular satisfaction, since these reprimands were really eulogies and these bad reports good reports according to the conduct he had now decided to maintain. At the same time, he could not help feeling a profound bitterness at the thought that his status at school was deteriorating every day and would soon become irre-

trievable. He often asked himself why he behaved this way; and he admitted that he could find no other motive from an obscure point of honor, arid, unpleasant, entirely negative and therefore almost insupportable. "Why do I do this?" he wondered. And meanwhile, amid all these conflicts, time was passing.

THE ANSWER TO THE QUESTION: "Why do I do this?" came to Luca quite by chance at this time from an incident of small importance.

One morning, because of the illness of a professor, lessons finished two hours before the usual time. As Luca came out to the street in front of the school, a boy with a football in his arms detached himself from a group and came up to him. This boy had an unusual name, Virginio, and Luca disliked him, chiefly because of his physical appearance. He was very fat, always out of breath and always busy. A soft black down shadowed his upper lip and his cheeks; beneath this his features, lost in fat, were almost embryonic, like those of some monstrous baby, and there was something indefinably feminine about him which had earned him the nickname of Teresina, after a celebrated Fat Woman. He said, panting, and with an air of importance: "We've made up two sides . . . we're going to have a game at the Villa Borghese . . . but we need a goalkeeper . . . would you like to come?"

Luca was a less than mediocre football player, although he liked the game very much; and he realized at once that this invitation from the fat boy, the recognized organizer of the class sporting activities, was an unaccustomed honor for which he ought to show his appreciation. They hardly ever invited him, so that this was an opportunity to be seized for putting his inadequate athletic qualities to the test. His first impulse was to accept, but some mysterious resistance changed the words in his mouth and he said: "I'm

sorry . . . but I've got to get home . . . another time, perhaps."

The fat boy wasted no time in discussing the matter; perhaps he already regretted having asked him. "Hey, Mario . . . d'you want to be goalkeeper?" he shouted, turning his back on Luca and going off toward another boy.

Luca saw this boy stop and speak to the fat boy. The group of players walked across and surrounded them. Then, after a short discussion, they moved off toward the gardens. The football had passed from the fat one's arms to those of a small, dark boy. The latter swayed as he walked along on his short legs; then he threw the ball up in front of himself and gave it a resounding kick which sent it high into the air. The boys scattered over the roadway and the sidewalks as they ran after the ball. One of them stopped it with his foot and started dribbling it carefully in front of him.

The street in which the school was situated was long, straight and deserted, flanked by severe looking factories, convents and offices. Between those rows of windows, on the clean asphalt, in the clear light of that early November day, went the group of boys, kicking the ball from one to the other with little leaps and bounds. Luca stood by the corner of the school building, watching them as they receded with a bitter satisfaction that did not seem new to him, though he found it difficult to recall when he had felt it before. Then he remembered: it was the same satisfaction that the ruin of his school career aroused in him. This discovery produced a swarm of swift, burning thoughts and held him entranced as he watched the footballers. It was as if not his companions but his own boyhood had departed, finally and forever. This would go on playing forever in the gardens of the villa and he would be excluded forever from their games. But he had at last understood the reason that underlay his refusal. Meanwhile the boys went farther and farther away, growing smaller and smaller in the perspective of the long empty street. At last they threw the ball into a cross

street and disappeared. Only then did Luca shake off his stupefied meditations and start toward home.

During the following days he observed that the sense of discovery he had experienced when comparing his refusal to play football with his refusal to work was confirmed and deepened. It was not so much a precise thought as a direction that had at last been given to his disordered feelings of disgust and rebellion. He had believed that he hated only his lessons; now he realized, when he thought again of the feeling of aversion that the fat boy's invitation had aroused in him, that he hated other things as well. What things? A rapid survey brought him to the astonishing discovery that his hostility embraced not merely one or a few aspects of his life, but all. At Luca's age it is easy to leap from the obscurest feelings to a strenuous abstract logic, disdainful of all compromise and of any possible exception. Luca reflected that the world, in the persons of his mother, his father, his teachers, his schoolfellows, wanted him to be a good son, a good pupil, a good friend, a good fellow; but he himself had no love for the world, nor for those roles that they wished to impose upon him, and therefore he must disobey. Not, however, with obscure acts of violence, with the sterile rages of an exhausted body, as in the past; but observing an order, a plan, with calmness and detachment, as though applying the rules of a game. The word "disobey" pleased him because it was familiar. Throughout his childhood and a great part of his boyhood he had heard his mother say that he must be obedient, that he was disobedient, and that if he didn't obey she would punish him, and other similar phrases. Perhaps by starting to be disobedient again on a more logical, higher plane, he was merely rediscovering an attitude of mind which was native to him but which he had lost. So far he had been disobedient only in the sphere of his school life, which was the dullest and most absurd part of his existence. But since the incident of the football game, he was discovering that this disobedience could be extended to other spheres as well; it could embrace other things which,

because they were normal and obvious, had hitherto escaped him—the affections, for instance; and—an extreme case which immediately fascinated him—the actual fact of living.

There came to him, at this thought, the feeling that it was truly a kind of game; it was like a composition complete in itself, an end in itself, with its own rhythm, its own design, its own meaning. Disobedience was the theme of the composition, and all the acts that accompanied it and that involved him ever more deeply, were the variations. The game, furthermore, resembled one of those drawing exercises for beginners, wherein the drawing is already indicated by a series of dots so that all the inexperienced child has to do is to follow the line of dots with a pencil. It was a cruel, destructive sort of game, but a game none the less, because it was carried out on a disinterested, experimental plane. It was in fact chiefly a question of following that mysterious movement which grew steadily more rapid and more coherent and which seemed to be carrying him toward utter annihilation; and of discovering, each time, the conjuncture of circumstances in which to live meant doing certain things, to die, doing the opposite things, and of regularly choosing the latter. Like all boys, Luca had a strong sporting sense. He decided that from now on he would hunt out all the things that bound him to this life for which he felt such a calm and satiated disgust. All this might have frightened him if he had seen it as it really was, a kind of suicide. But dressed in the familiar, innocuous guise of a game it attracted and pleased him.

Oddly enough he did not think of his affection for his parents as a bond that held him to life and that must be destroyed. As a matter of fact he did not feel himself bound to them to any greater extent than to the furniture in his home, or to his schoolfellows. He no longer remembered how or when it had happened, but in some now fabulous past some irreparable thing certainly had occurred which made him cease to love them. This decay of his filial love was brought home to

him by the comparison of his former feelings with those of the present. There had been a period when he had had a feeling of almost religious reverence for his parents, when it had seemed to him that they were perfect and that they derived from this perfection an authority that was both lovable and unquestionable. This perfection, he remembered, had seemed to him to be founded upon an almost unbelievable goodness, a goodness that, just because it was unbelievable, was moving in the highest degree. It was not the kind of goodness that later on had been prescribed to him by schoolmistresses and governesses and by his parents themselves, a goodness made up of rules and precepts, of regulations and duties; it was a much wider sort of goodness, indescribable, without beginning and without end, a goodness of which he felt the effects without investigating the causes. To this goodness furthermore, he had never made any appeal; it was enough for him to be conscious of its omnipotent presence all around him and above him, the source of his life and its ultimate justification. During those years this goodness had been what he thought the sun must be for the grass and for the flowers of the fields—a flood of light, everlasting, indifferent perhaps, but though blind, infinitely generous, impregnating every one of his acts, even the smallest, every moment of his life, even the most fleeting, and imbuing them with warmth and energy. At that time he had really been, without recognizing it, grateful to his parents for having brought him into the world and for being themselves alive; and in that, fundamentally, lay their goodness.

He could not have said whether the certainty of this perfection, made up as it was exclusively of goodness, had declined on account of one precise, detached incident, or through a series of minute facts difficult to remember. The only thing he was sure of was that now nothing at all remained of that perfection and of the veneration he had accorded it. Like the sun, which you cannot look at full in the face and which is all light and nothing but light and whose contours you cannot exactly define, so at one time the countenances of his

parents had been unknown to him. He would look at them without distinguishing them, observing nothing but the light of that blinding, beneficent goodness. But today—just as if the brilliant morning had been followed by a dreary evening and those two suns had been transmuted into two dead, cold moons—today he could see their faces clearly, and in those faces the smallest and most disheartening details. He saw them, in fact, with complete precision, in the pitiless light of reality, just as he saw the faces of his schoolfellows or his teachers. And because he saw them so well, it seemed to him that they had been degraded to a lower rank. And with this degradation to objects of insignificance there had disappeared from his life the warmth that gave it energy. He did not recognize this with absolute clarity, but he had an obscure intuition that his revolt against the world must have begun just at the time this warmth had diminished.

One incident contributed to the final fixing of his parents' new character and of his new feeling about them. His father, when he came home in the evening, usually took out of his pocket the afternoon papers and gave them to Luca to read; later, at bedtime, he would take them back again because, as Luca knew, he liked to read them in bed before he went to sleep. It was one of those familiar habits that make up the smooth, unbroken surface of everyday life. One evening Luca, perhaps out of absent-mindedness, left the dining-room and went to bed taking the newspapers with him. In bed, after having looked at the pictures and run through some of the articles, he began to think that his father had been left without the papers and would certainly be very sorry not to have them. This mental picture was colored by pathetic reflections of the former paternal goodness, fallen now to the level of mere human goodness, but still moving and lovable. He imagined that his father did not come to ask him for the papers because he did not want to awaken him; and this sacrifice appeared to him to be one more proof of his father's tender affection. Furthermore he knew that his parents, even after they were in bed,

stayed awake until late, chatting or reading. For a long time he weighed the pros and cons, and finally decided to take the newspapers straight to his father in his room. He jumped out of bed, went barefooted into the passage and along to the door of his parents' room. He stood listening for a moment. He thought he could hear them talking and he went in without knocking, with a haste that came from affection and from a desire to repair the wrong done to his father.

The lights were on, as he had expected. The bed took up a large part of the wall opposite the door, so that the first thing Luca saw was the empty pillow and the sheets turned back on both sides of the bed. The empty bed did not hold his attention for more than a moment. To the right of the bed in the farthest corner of the room stood his father and mother in unusual attitudes. His father was wearing wide-striped pyjamas which were crumpled over his fat body; his mother was standing close beside his father, her bony limbs visible through the transparency of her nightgown. His father was clasping to his chest with both arms a bundle which Luca immediately recognized as banknotes and industrial bonds. His mother, standing in front with her arms raised, was fumbling at a picture hanging on the wall.

Luca knew that picture extremely well: it was a copy of a Raphael Madonna, and beneath it was a medieval *prie-dieu* made of dark-colored wood, with a red brocade cushion upon it. As a child, Luca had for a long time been made by his mother to kneel on that cushion when he said his evening prayers. He used to kneel down, join his hands, and turning his eyes up to the picture, repeat in a docile manner the words of the prayer which his mother, sitting beside him, would recite to him, little by little, in a patient voice. This prayer was not at that time distasteful to him; first because it was a thing easily endurable though boring, with that mild, pleasing boredom which is the staple nourishment of infancy, and also because the picture of the Madonna, so gentle, with her Child in her arms, she herself clothed in red and

blue, with a pure, luminous landscape behind her, attracted him and gave rein to his imagination. Once, with sleep coming upon him, he had even thought that the picture had nodded and smiled at him. More often, as he repeated mechanically the words of the prayer, he had speculated upon the expression of the Virgin's countenance, or upon the details of the hilly, springlike landscape that opened out behind the shoulders of the figure. Then, in the way these things happen, one day or another—perhaps on their return after the holidays—this habit of saying his prayers there had been interrupted. For a time he had gone on saying his prayers by himself; finally he had given up saying his prayers altogether.

Perhaps he had opened the door without making a noise; perhaps the door had been ajar and he had only to push it; perhaps his parents were so completely absorbed in what they were doing they had not heard him. However that may be, he stood for a long time, motionless at the door, watching them without their noticing his presence. He saw his mother open her arms, take hold of the picture by its frame, detach it from the wall and put it down carefully on the floor, leaning it against the wall. He realized then that the picture had concealed the square, slightly shiny gray surface of the steel door of a safe. "Two b's and one s," his father said, standing close behind his mother. Following her husband's instruction, his mother turned certain discs in the metal door and swung it noiselessly open. It was a small safe, as Luca could see, and contained on its two shelves several other bundles of banknotes and rolls of bonds. "Push them well back," said his father in his usual melting voice; "otherwise we'll never get these in too." His mother obeyed, and Luca saw her pushing far into the safe, with her thin arms, the money and the bonds already there so as to make room for the new ones. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, he went into the room and threw the newspapers down on the bed, saying: "There are the papers." He saw his father give a violent start, like a thief caught in the act, and his mother turn her head

in astonishment, with a look already severe; then he hurriedly left the room. In his own bedroom, the confused feeling of having done a good deed was mixed with a bitter taste of disappointment and guilt. But he was drowsy, and after turning over in his mind, from various angles, the new, disturbing picture of the safe hidden behind the holy picture and of his parents, in a state of semi-nudity, their arms laden with money, he fell asleep.

Next day he had already almost forgotten the incident, or rather he tried not to think of it. But in the evening, at table, at a moment when his father was not there, his mother observed dryly: "Remember, another time, that one doesn't go into bedrooms without knocking." Luca blushed and felt inclined to answer: "And why did you for so many years make me say my prayers kneeling in front of your money?" The remark came into his mind just as though it had taken shape by itself, during sleep, by a sort of spontaneous coagulation, like ice on a winter night. He realized at once that it was an extremely apposite remark, and felt that it contained much more than he himself meant by it. But he restrained himself and hung his head, pretending to be mortified. Later, thinking over the incident again, he came to the conclusion that it had been, if not the primary cause, at any rate the principal occasion for the progressive decline of his parents to the status of things that were alien and unloved.

But, if affection for his parents no longer held him to life, and if there was now no need for him to take the trouble of destroying it, since it had, so to speak, burnt itself out and destroyed itself, there were still other things that seemed to him too much alive and too obtrusive, which were therefore fitted by natural right to become a part of the game of destruction that he

was consistently evolving day by day. Property, for instance. Luca, ever since he had been a baby, had looked upon all objects in his own possession with a feeling of jealousy and exclusiveness which—as generally happens—had been encouraged and stimulated by his parents in every possible way. Ever since his earliest days, toys had always been given him with an accompanying significant exclamation which contained both an opinion and an appeal to his possessive instinct: "Isn't it lovely? . . . Try not to break it."

Later came other toys more ingenious and less simple, such as Meccano and a marionette theatre and with them the first books of fables and children's stories. More than anything else, Luca had been crazy about his little theatre, and his father, noticing this passion, had cultivated it by bringing his son, at least once a week, a present of one or two marionettes. He used to say, in a deliberately careless manner, without raising his eyes from the paper he was reading: "Luca, why don't you go into the hall and have a look in my overcoat pocket? I believe there might be something there for you." Luca, filled with delight and, at the same time, with a strange sort of humiliating feeling that he was succumbing to an almost illicit passion, would run into the hall; and there in fact, sticking out from the pocket of his father's overcoat as it hung on the coatrack, would be a long package with bits of wire projecting from it. When he had undone the paper with impatient fingers, there would appear a couple of warriors with breastplates of shining tin foil, or a grand lady dressed in sky-blue velvet, or a black and red devil armed with a fork, and a white-garbed cook. Luca would embrace his father and then run to his room and place the marionettes beside the others that he already possessed, in a big wooden box with compartments. In this way he had come to own more than a hundred dolls. At first he had tried to make them perform improvised acts on the stage of the tiny theatre, against a background of scenery representing a palace, a forest, or a prison. But then the collector's passion had prevailed over the disinterested taste for

playing, and he had been content to lay his marionettes in rows in the big box, as a miser hoards coins at the bottom of a chest. He would count them over and over, kiss them, stroke them, gaze at them for a long time as he knelt on the floor, then put them back in the box—and that was all. He was conscious, as he did this, of an immense satisfaction which, however, he always felt to be mingled with a kind of obscure remorse. This passion for the marionette theatre had lasted longer than any of the others. But in the end the remorse had overcome the passion, he had felt satiety and disgust with his collection of dolls and had abandoned them to the dust at the bottom of a cupboard. His father had noticed this neglect and had ceased to give him any more presents of marionettes.

After the theatre it had been Meccano, the use of which his father had taught him, himself crawling about on the floor and putting together the first simple machines. Finally, at a later age, had come the first adventure stories, the stamp collection, the sporting goods. Every time, the same progression had occurred in his mind, from disinterested amusement to the jealous, inert sense of possession, from attachment to disgust. But this disgust had never been strong enough to induce him to rid himself completely of the objects which no longer interested him. So violent a possessive passion created, between him and the things that had been once so beloved and were now neglected, an obscure bond of jealousy and fear, on account of which—though he completely ceased to make use of them or to enjoy them, though he even sometimes went so far as to forget their very existence—he could never bring himself to give them away or to destroy them. He kept them even if they were spoiled or mutilated, and the drawers in his cupboard were full of odd, crumpled albums of stories, headless or legless marionettes, half-empty boxes of Meccano. The books he was constantly acquiring and reading were an exception; and the stamp collection too, which—though with lessened interest—he continued to enrich with new specimens.

Later on, as the last act in this lengthy initiation into the ownership of property, Luca's father, when he considered him to be old enough, allowed him a small monthly sum as pocket money. Luca drew his allowance on the first day of each month and his father, as he handed him the money, expected in return a kiss of gratitude on the cheek. Money, as Luca soon discovered, aroused in his mind a sense of possession that was more mysterious and more absolute than that aroused by the dolls and other objects, a feeling that was remote from all idea of play or amusement, that was in fact quite incomprehensible. At first he spent it on sweets and books, but on finding that he could get his parents to give him sweets and books without his having to break into his treasure, he took to hoarding it and not spending it. He thought vaguely of saving a sufficient sum for the acquirement of some particularly expensive object—what, he did not know; he was, in reality, succumbing to the same instinct that had made him collect marionettes. Only then it had been a question of objects in which certain characteristics of quality and variety had been more important than mere quantity. Now, on the other hand, in the case of money, which consisted of ugly crumpled notes and coins that all looked alike, only quantity, with its stark numerical increases, counted as a stimulus to his collector's enthusiasm. And so, almost without noticing it, he slipped from the joy of possession—harsh though its taste may have been—into avarice. It was an innocent, ignorant avarice, like the shamelessness of a child that is allowed by its mother to run naked on the beach. So ignorant was it that he announced one day triumphantly to his father that he wanted to save up his monthly allowance until he reached the sum of a thousand *lire*. "Well done," answered his father, kissing him, "but in that case you ought to put your money in the savings bank." And he explained to him that not only would the money be safer than in a box, but also it would increase regularly, without any trouble on his part, just as a plant increases and bears fruit. Only then, in the midst of his father's praises and explana-

tions, did Luca become aware of an unexplained feeling of shame. And with the excuse that he had not enough money to open a banking account he refused the offer of a savings book. The feeling of shame, however, vanished almost at once; it was but the premature glimmer of a conscience not yet awakened. And the coins and the notes of his monthly pocket money continued to pile up in his desk.

The sacrifice of his possessions and his money, in spite of those former now forgotten emotions of satiety, disgust and shame of which only now did he think he understood the full importance and meaning, was even more difficult than the sacrifice of his pride as a scholar. It was the reluctance of an exhausted body which had led him to shirk his lessons, but he felt he would never have reached the point of repudiating his property had it not been for grief and bewilderment such as is inspired by a cruel and apparently unjustified privation. It was true that, from the moment he discovered that they bound him to the world and forced him to accept it, he had felt a kind of raging hatred for these objects and for his savings, but he knew that he hated them precisely because he loved them and not because they were odious in themselves, like his lessons. He felt himself divided as never before, pulled in one direction by the "game" and the dark, mysterious longing to play it out right to the end, in the other by the painful feeling that he was blowing up his bridges behind him, making impossible any turning back from the unknown, perilous land into which he was venturing. After all, he had passionately loved his books, his stamp albums, his sports equipment; after all, every penny put away in the box had represented, for him, the sacrifice of something that he could have bought and the hope of some other thing that some day he would buy. Those objects and that money were not merely objects and money, but living, tenacious strands in the woof of which his existence was woven. But it was just because of this that he wished to break those threads; for they were also a sign of obedience to the destiny which had been im-

posed upon him without his being consulted, and to the world against which he had attempted so often, and always in vain, to rebel. Had they been things already dead, abandoned by the love which had in the past made them alive—as in a sense his parents were—their destruction would have been useless. But the contrary was true; and the rules of this bitter game of disobedience admitted no exceptions.

Several times he postponed the act; then finally, one day, made up his mind. Among his schoolfellows there was a certain quiet, pedantic boy who was convinced of his own perfection both as a scholar and as a boy just as though the conditions of school and boyhood were going to last the whole of his life. He was called Poli and he had a big, close-cropped head very like a pumpkin upon which somebody, with the point of a small knife, had roughly carved the features of a human face. Poli's thin, pinched body also bore out this idea of a pumpkin, for it made one think of the thin, fragile stalks at the end of which, among the furrows of the field or on the roof tiles, these enormous yellow fruits swell to their full size. He was the best boy in the class, and his superiority was always at the same high level and could never be surpassed, whether it was a case of algebra or Latin or Italian or history. This easy and apparently effortless superiority seemed to Luca mysterious, as though it were the product of some kind of witchcraft rather than of a mind subject to forgetfulness and error, like his own. He invited Poli to spend an afternoon at his home, and Poli immediately remarked: "I warn you that if it's a matter of helping you with your homework, nothing doing." Luca slyly assured him that it had nothing at all to do with homework.

Poli arrived, rather diffident, and Luca, after a few words of welcome, announced his intention of making him a present of his stamp collection. As he said this he brought out the collection, four large albums bound in red and gold cloth, and showed them to Poli. The latter, incredulous, suspected a trap or an obligation

of some kind. "But why to *me*?" he asked finally; "we're not friends . . . we hardly know each other."

"I think I shall soon be going abroad," Luca answered calmly, "and as I was very fond of this collection, I thought you would be the only person who would keep it in order."

Tempted and at the same time visibly anxious not to show it, Poli, with hesitating fingers, turned the leaves of the albums. Then he said: "I'll give you something in exchange . . . not so valuable as the collection of course . . . but something . . . what would you like?"

"I don't want anything," replied Luca.

Then, to change the subject, he too started turning the leaves, pretending that he wanted to show Poli the best items in the collection. What he really wanted was to test whether he was sorry to be getting rid of it. The stamps, neatly stuck on the thick, gilt-edged pages with their headings in four languages, passed before his eyes. Here were the stamps of various European countries since the war, with republican superscriptions on top of the heads of kings—these had given him a dramatic sense of the political upheavals in those lands. Here were the older and more valuable stamps, the Papal stamps, those of the Italian States, of the German Confederation, simple, small, but beautiful with their faded, delicate colors. Here were the colonial stamps with tropical landscapes and figures of natives; they had not cost much but had made him dream of those far-off countries. Here were the stamps issued to commemorate some great man or some great event—these too had stirred his imagination. He had taken pleasure in acquiring them separately or in small sets at stationers' shops, in sticking them into the albums, examining their price and history in the French catalogue. He had taken pleasure in the figures that indicated their value, followed by the names of exotic coinages he had never seen. He had taken pleasure in the round postmarks canceling them, with the date and the place they came from; but above all in those that had wavy lines, which had made him think of the waves of the sea that the letters must have crossed to

arrive at their destinations. He realized, as he turned the pages of the albums, that he was suffering a quite different pain from what he had expected. He had expected to suffer through avarice; he found he was suffering, instead, from self-pity. He was truly furious with himself; he could not help thinking it was as if he were divided into two parts, one of which lay abandoned and wretched on the ground, feebly defending itself, while the other stood over it, striking it without mercy. Closing the album sharply, he said: "Well then, d'you want them or not?"

"Of course I want them."

"Wait while I wrap them up in a newspaper."

Leaving the room, he got a newspaper from a cupboard. While he was looking for it, he thought for a moment that he would go back to Poli and announce that the whole thing had been a joke. But the act of getting rid of the collection appeared to him so much more real and genuine a thing than the keeping of it would have been that he hesitated no longer. He took the newspaper and went back into the room. Poli, who was looking admiringly at the stamps, hastily closed the album as he entered, as though he feared that Luca might change his mind if he showed his delight. Luca asked: "You've got a stamp collection already, haven't you?"

"Yes," replied Poli with an air of wisdom, "but much less complete than this. I shall sell the duplicates and buy other stamps with the money."

When Poli had gone Luca started thinking about how he could best get rid of his books. He had a good number of them, and he loved them even more than the stamps. They were, for the most part, adventure stories, detective novels and historical novels. Luca had had two different feelings about these books. He had had an affection for each individual book, for the sake of what it contained, and at the same time he had conceived a tenacious passion for books as pieces of property. This passion had in it a good deal of avarice, springing as it did rather from the joy of possession than from the character of the thing possessed. At one

time he had been seized by a restless desire to fill up the three shelves of his bookcase, and since he had not enough novels, he had put in with them some old birthday presents and school primers. All included, this mixed collection of books amounted to the round figure of three hundred, checked over again and again by Luca, who often threw himself down on the floor to count the books and arrange them in order of size. Now while it had been easy to get rid of the stamp albums, which took up little space, with the books there was the problem of emptying the bookcase without his parents noticing. After thinking it over for a long time he decided to make a lie, a suitable lie that would allow him to destroy his library without arousing any suspicions. One day he went to his mother and said: "Mummy, I want to sell all my books."

"Sell all your books?" she said. "Why?"

"I've read them over and over again," replied Luca; "I want to sell them and buy a phonograph and some records."

It was exactly the right kind of lie. His father and mother would never have allowed such a sale unless it had been for the sake of some new acquisition. For them the only use of property was to create more property. Besides, Luca knew that his mother loved music and could not but be pleased at this new wish on his part. After a pause she said: "But the money from the books won't be enough."

For a moment Luca feared that his mother, touched by his love of music, might offer to buy him the phonograph without his sacrificing his books—though he knew that such generosity, of any kind, was not included among her educational theories; so he hastened to reply: "I'll add my savings to it... the whole lot together will make it possible for me to pay the first installments on a phonograph and to buy a few records as well."

Having obtained his mother's approval, Luca asked a second-hand bookseller whom he knew to come to the house. The bookseller, a short young man with a greedy expression and long, curly, greasy hair, came

into the room with his overcoat on and his hat in his hand and began to examine the books that Luca handed to him one by one. During this examination Luca wondered again, as before when he had given Poli the stamp collection, whether he was suffering at being separated from his beloved books. He realized his pain was considerably less and that his amused feeling that it was a game, and his consciousness of his own duplicity, partly counterbalanced it. The bookseller, no less interested than Poli had been, tried to depreciate the value of the books, twisting his mouth and repeating that the volumes were too badly damaged and too ordinary; Luca, on his side, pretending to be very angry, contradicted the bookseller's remarks. Finally the latter said: "It's all common stuff... I might give you something... for the whole lot."

"How much?" asked Luca.

The bookseller twisted his mouth, casting a glance of contempt over the velvet collar of his coat toward the pile of books; then mentioned a figure. "That's not much," said Luca; "let's make it double."

"It's not even worth discussing," answered the bookseller. And he took up his hat which he had placed on the table.

Luca hesitated, then had an idea. He would propose to the bookseller to make one lot of the books together with the puppets and the sports gear. In that way, with one stroke, he would get rid of everything he possessed. "Wait a moment," he said; "I'll throw in some other things and then you can give me the amount I asked for."

"What things?"

Luca went to the far end of the room and opened a cupboard in the wall. In it were a football and some boxing gloves, quite new. There was a sailboat with all its sails spread. There was the marionette theatre, with the marionettes. "I don't keep a junk-shop," said the bookseller. But in his little deep-set eyes there was a sudden look of greed.

"This football alone," said Luca, "cost me more than what you are offering me for all my books."

In the end the bookseller accepted Luca's figure and paid the amount. The same day a carrier came and took away the books and the other things in a packing case. When he was alone Luca looked with satisfaction at his empty shelves. It was just as he had said to Poli, he couldn't help thinking, just as if he was getting ready to leave on a long journey. But the joy that he felt in face of the emptiness of his room was not the joy of departure; it was, rather, the mournful, frigid joy of arrival in a bare and uninhabited land where he knew that nothing awaited him. That day he did even less work than usual. Every moment his mind reverted to his books, to his stamp collection, to his sports gear and, at the thought that he had had the strength to get rid of them, he felt an inexhaustible, mysterious, almost sensual satisfaction. He pictured to himself how Poli must be thinking that he was a fool, how the bookseller must be congratulating himself on his excellent deal, and he was pleased that those two should be convinced that they had taken him in. At the same time he was aware of a certain lightness and sense of relief, like someone who has carried a heavy burden a long way and suddenly feels himself free of it.

There remained, however, the money. He had to get rid of it and at the same time somehow or other justify his failure to buy a phonograph. Luca seized the opportunity at supper of announcing in a quiet but sorrowful manner: "There's something I must tell you . . . but you must both promise me you won't be angry . . ."

His parents looked at him in alarm. Luca went on: "This morning in the street car my wallet was stolen—or possibly it fell out of my pocket . . . anyhow I haven't been able to find it since . . . and in it was all my money . . . the money I was going to use to buy the phonograph . . ."

After the usual questions—"How on earth did it happen?—and why weren't you more careful?—and where, exactly, *was* your wallet?—and why did you have *all* your money in it?"—there followed a discussion during which Luca was several times on the point

of giving up all hope that his plan would succeed. For his father, filled with pity at so cruel a misfortune, seemed inclined to give him back the amount he had lost; while his mother, irritated at the loss and at her son's carelessness, opposed the plan of compensating him, arguing that the disaster "would serve him as a lesson for the future." Luca saw that, if his father's argument prevailed, he would not only have twice the sum of money that he already possessed, but he would also be forced to buy the phonograph, with the risk of becoming attached to an object so new and so pleasing. He followed the discussion anxiously, trusting only the soft, yielding strain in his father's character. And in the end his mother succeeded in winning her point; with this reservation, however, that if Luca brought home a good report at the end of the term, his parents would make him a present of the phonograph and of an adequate number of records. Luca, knowing that his report would be extremely bad, smiled cheerfully.

IT WAS THE BEGINNING of December. One afternoon Luca went out carrying in the pockets of his overcoat all the money he possessed, in silver coins and small notes. It was a day of respite after long rains. The sky was washed clean but was still dark with a smoky, even color, as though its customary blue had been replaced, not by the confused gray of cloud that dissolves in rain or is chased away by the wind, but by a different hue, more settled, more gloomy, forever unchangeable. In the cool, windless air there was the feeling of exhaustion that succeeds the raging of a storm; but a flock of crows, hovering low, seemed to give warning with their watery cries that there would be more rain. Looking up at the sky and turning the money in his pocket Luca made his way toward the public gardens not far from his home. He knew that at that hour of the day there was no one there and

that he could act with the certainty of not being observed. He passed through the big gates and penetrated deep into the gardens. He knew just where he was going—to a place that was bound up in his memory with a sort of fixation of his childhood years. This was an open space bounded on three sides by large, leafy ilexes and on the fourth by a decorative wall adorned with niches, columns and Roman inscriptions. On the other side of the wall lay the zoological gardens, and you could often hear the roaring of the hungry beasts. As a child, Luca had often been brought for a walk by his governesses to this melancholy, deserted place, whose white gravel was darkly framed by the bronze foliage of the ilexes. While his governess, sitting on a fallen capital, would read a book, Luca would climb up to the gratings of the empty windows in the wall and try to look into the zoo beyond. Or he would wander through the ilex grove at the edge of the open space. It was shady in there, and the ground was covered with several layers of dead leaves, dry at the surface, shiny and damp underneath. Here and there grew clumps of nettles whose bright green seemed to feed on all this decay and which filled Luca with repulsion.

One day at home the governess and the maid had been talking about murder. A young man had been killed; the body had not been found, but some blood-stained garments and the place where these had been discovered had made it seem probable that the corpse had been buried in one of the many public gardens of the town. Luca, without saying a word, pretending to play, had listened for a long time to the comments of the two women; finally he had asked the maid: "Why did they kill him?" She had answered, in a bitter, sharp tone: "Because he was handsome and good, that's why . . . because he was not made for this world"; and he, struck by this phrase, had asked no more questions. But later, he could not have said why, it had become fixed in his mind that the corpse of the young man had been buried in the same open space where he so often went for a walk with his governess.

This supposition had no foundation in fact, not even a mistaken or a very slight one; but perhaps for that very reason it had seemed to him irrefutable. His mind full of this terrible and at the same time fascinating secret, it pleased him to be able, as he wandered about the open space, to look with certainty at the precise spot where, beneath the ground, the corpse was crumbling to pieces. It was a corner between the wall and the grove at the foot of a great ilex; and Luca would often stop at the place, fumbling with his foot among the dead leaves or piercing the soft earth all about him with a stick. He knew that the dead man lay below, and not for anything in the world would he have renounced his conviction. Besides, by dint of thinking about it, he had reconstructed the crime in his own way, and had even formed a picture in his mind of what the murdered man and his murderers looked like. The former had evidently been a handsome, good young man, as the maid had said; but with a special sort of beauty and goodness, in no way conspicuous, invisible to most people, secret. As for the others, Luca saw them as being in every way similar to anyone that he met in the street, ordinary, nameless passers-by. They had perhaps killed him in order to rob him, as the papers said; but in truth, as the maid had said, it had been out of hatred for his beauty and his goodness, to remove him from this world for which he was not made. As he thought of the young man and of his death he felt a horrified attraction and at the same time a great compassion. And then as time went on, almost without realizing it he imagined that the murdered man was himself and that the body buried under the ilex was his own. This duplication of himself, brought about by some kind of imaginative fondness both for the appearance and for the fate of the murdered man, seemed to him perfectly natural, nor was it the first time such a thing had happened. On other occasions, when reading books of adventure, he had dreamed of being this or that heroic, successful character. But it was the first time he had happened to fall in love with so gloomy a destiny, and he had an

obscure feeling that unlike his other duplications, this one was due to profound causes, to an obsession in which the whole vocation of his life expressed itself. Such an obsession, as generally happens, had gradually through the years dwindled away like a mist that vanishes in the sunshine; it had become transformed into a sad memory and had finally disappeared into oblivion.

But now, on his way to the open space in the gardens, the obsession came back to him in a different form. He knew by this time that no one had ever been buried in the open space, but that space, consecrated once and for all by his imagination, still remained the place where a corpse *ought* to be buried. He would bury the money in the same spot where he once had thought the murdered man lay; and in burying the money he would in a certain sense be burying himself also—or at any rate that part of himself was attached to the money. And in a vague way mixed up with these more serious matters were memories of buried treasure in circumstances of adventure, echoes of the reading of his early youth.

It was Poe's *The Gold Bug* that he had particularly in mind. But this was a kind of alibi, with the object of removing all quality of the tragic from his sacrifice, of keeping it within the bounds of a game. Apart from the money, he had brought with him a blue glass medicine bottle in which he had enclosed a card explaining exactly where he was going to bury his little treasure. Knowing nothing of ciphers, Luca had contented himself with writing the explanation in schoolboy slang, adding an "f" to each syllable. As in the story he intended to hide this bottle in the hollow of one of the ilexes that surrounded the open space.

He walked across a big square lawn, looking straight in front of him. At the far side of the lawn, the black trunks of the ilex grove swayed back and forth like a crowd seized with panic that rocks to and fro before it breaks and flees. Through the ilexes, the pale whiteness of the gravel catching the light, he had a glimpse of the open space with the wall behind it. He went

into the grove, walking with conscious pleasure on the sloping carpet of dead leaves. In the silence under the trees he heard the thin whistle of a bird, and turning he saw the bird itself, big and black, hopping along the ground and then taking flight and hiding among the leaves. He noticed also that as he made his way through the wood he felt a sensation of freedom, and he thought how fine a thing action was, even if it was for the destruction of one's own life, and that action consisted in this—performing acts according to one's own ideas and not merely from necessity.

There was no one in the open space. He walked about for a while, thinking of the time when he had been convinced the corpse was buried there, and he seemed to rediscover intact the lonely, rather sinister feeling of the place which had enthralled him as a child. He looked at the wall with its empty niches, its fragmentary inscriptions, its crumbling cornices. He looked at the windows with the seats beneath them and the big gratings. He climbed up to one of these windows and looked through to the other side, into the zoological garden. He could see the thick foliage of a laurel hedge, and among the leaves he thought he caught a glimpse of the green and gold feathers of some large exotic bird. A distant roaring made him start: the wild beasts, as in the old days, as always, were hungry. He came down again from the window and walked over to the place he was seeking. There was still the same ilex, ancient, with a great black rift in its trunk, its main branch projecting toward the open space and leaning on a brick support like the arm of a cripple on a crutch. Beneath the ilex was the corpse. There came back to him in all its cruelty and pathos the feeling that it was he himself who was buried there, he himself who had been pitilessly murdered.

He knelt down under the tree and started to dig a hole with his penknife. Beneath the dead leaves, the soil was moist and light, full of decayed fragments of bark. He loosened the earth and then scooped it out with his hand and put it to one side in a small heap.

When he had finished making the hole, he slowly took from his pocket the banknotes and started tearing them up one after another, letting the pieces drop down into the hole. He discovered that he felt a profound hatred for this money, the sort of hatred one might feel for a tyrant against whom one has rebelled. The idea, too, that money was held in such high esteem by his parents and that he himself without knowing it had for so many years said his prayers in front of a safe full of money contributed to his resentment. As he tore up the notes he felt he was avenging his prayers, was accomplishing an act of reparation. But money, too, was sacred—though in quite a different way from the sacred picture that had concealed it while he was praying. It was sacred because of the royal effigies and symbols that guaranteed its value; and it was sacred because it might have meant happiness to so many people. To the poor man, for instance, who, every morning as he was going to school, stretched out his hand toward him at the corner of the street. But to give it to a poor man would have been, fundamentally, to respect it, to acknowledge its value. And Luca wanted, instead, truly to destroy it, not merely by his own desire to do so but in actual fact. Detested idol as he felt it to be, nothing less than this blasphemous tearing to pieces could serve utterly to desecrate it.

When he had finished tearing up the notes, he mixed the pieces together, and then pulling an envelope full of silver coins from his pocket, he thrust it into the bottom of the hole on top of the notes. He performed these actions with a sense of austerity that was grave and conscious, yet mingled with a mortal sadness. The thought of the dead man murdered and buried there came back to his mind, and again he was assailed by that strange feeling of pity for himself. Meanwhile he was filling the hole with earth. When he had finished, he leveled the soil and covered the whole thing over with a carpet of dead leaves.

He rose, brushing the knees of his trousers which were damp and dirty with earth, and then he remem-

bered the blue glass bottle and Edgar Allan Poe's story. By now he lacked the courage to carry out this part of his plan. He had a feeling of gloomy, dazed depression and realized that after all it had not been a game. *He* was not the bloodstained, callous pirate at the end of a life of adventure and freedom; this open space was not the deserted shore of some savage land; and in fact no one would ever make the joyful discovery of his poor little treasure of torn banknotes and small silver coins. The unrelieved mediocrity of himself, of the place and of his treasure all at once seemed to him the best proof of the dogged seriousness of what he was doing and of the impossibility of deceiving himself by attributing to it the importance of a mere game. He took the bottle out of his pocket, opened it, pulled out the little scroll and tore it into tiny pieces. He crushed the bottle under his heel. As he went away, he felt he had acted like a madman. All the same there must be some sense in this madness, only he was not yet in a position to discover it.

AFTER THAT DAY Luca seemed to fall into a deathly torpor, as though his body, exhausted by the proofs of will-power that it had given, were recovering itself for a last, decisive effort. More and more often he fell asleep halfway through his homework; more and more often, at school he fell into fits of abstraction allowing the voices of the professors to spin round him in an empty, sustained silence, like the sound of a broken record endlessly repeating the same phrase. After a few fine days winter had resumed its course and it rained most of the time. The rain descending from a pitch-black sky seemed to be dark and opaque, as though it were mixed with mud, and it spread everywhere a darkness which made Luca feel it would be pleasant to curl up and go to sleep for good. Sometimes, as he did his lessons, he would raise his eyes

toward the window and feel convinced that the sky was clearing. He would become absorbed in his work; half an hour later he would look up again and be astonished at the sight of the heavy, gray rain flowing in silent waves down the windowpanes. The sky was like a person weeping in some profound sorrow, who seems every now and then to grow calmer and more serene but who is soon caught up again by grief and starts once more to shed tears, more abundantly and more violently than ever. He liked, above all, the hour between day and night. He liked to linger at his table in front of the rain-streaked windowpanes, forcing himself to read or write in the growing darkness, until the moment when the early winter twilight fell upon his page like an impalpable dust. Then he would rise and throw himself on the bed, falling asleep almost at once. His task remained unfinished.

He had now embarked upon the last part of his plan—physical death. He proceeded, however, indirectly, without understanding what he was doing, by observing his own greediness and forming, in consequence, a determination to suppress it, just as he had suppressed his pride in his work at school and his attachment to property. He had always enjoyed eating, especially at lunch time on his return from school, when in the voracity with which he threw himself upon his food he seemed to recognize the acceptance, by his whole body, of all that he had been and had done before he sat down to table. Besides, there were certain kinds of food which, apart from any question of appetite, he particularly liked—sweets and cakes, for example. And so setting in motion his usual "game" mechanism, he took care to eat only a small amount of the ordinary kinds of food and nothing at all of the things he liked best. At first he cut down the amount he ate by a quarter, then by a half. He left the table hungry, but the sensation was short-lived and soon disappeared. It came back again toward evening, but then he would try to sleep, and by sleeping he succeeded in quelling his hunger. He felt that the less he ate the more easily he would fall asleep.

It seemed, then, that there were rules for death as there were for life. If living meant being enthusiastic about one's lessons, loving one's parents, saving up money, becoming attached to objects, eating, it followed that dying must mean not eating, ridding oneself of all affection both for things and for people, and, above all, sleeping.

His parents did not appear to notice this strange loss of appetite on his part; or rather, he thought probably they did notice it but did not attach importance to it, being used to his frequent caprices in the matter of food. His mother, however, remarked one day, in a severe tone of voice: "Why don't you eat? At your age you need nourishment... Even if you're not hungry you ought to force yourself to eat... if you don't eat how can you do your lessons?" "Yes, how can I do my lessons?" thought Luca, amused. It pleased him to think that his parents were so far from suspecting that he was deliberately not eating, notwithstanding his appetite which urged him to take nourishment. Not eating. He realized that of all forms of disobedience this was the most serious, the most fundamental, the one that most thoroughly undermined familiar authority. His father and mother were there for the special purpose of making him eat. His mother had fed him with the milk of her own breast; his father, like the primitive hunter leaving the cave at dawn armed with bow and arrow to slay some animal on which to feed his family, left home every morning to seek in the town the money that would serve to support him. He felt he had reached the extreme limit of disobedience, that he had arrived in a rarefied atmosphere in which his game was becoming difficult and dangerous. His parents wished him to eat so that he should create strength for himself, and should live; and he, possessed by a feeling of unqualified revolt, wished not to eat, and to die. The game was still on, but he was totally unable to see how far he would have the strength to pursue it. For death had not yet appeared to him as a definite aim, although his every act was a provocation of it.

One day his father placed him in an embarrassing position by making an appeal, not to his appetite, but to a deeper feeling which he did not know he had retained. It was some time since he had reduced his eating, but his parents apparently did not attribute much importance to his loss of appetite. One day he noticed a white package lying beside his father's plate. And at the end of lunch he saw his father take up the package and solemnly undo the string.

It was a cake, the kind that Luca had once liked best. His father put aside the paper and string, placed the cake on a plate and said in his drawling, good-natured voice: "I bought a cake . . . I was passing a confectioner's and I went in and bought it . . . it should be a good one."

"If you bought it for me," said his mother, "you know quite well that I don't like cakes."

"Really I bought it for Luca," said his father; "he used to like them . . . but perhaps"—and he gave a knowing wink—"it may be that, now he's grown big, he's changed his ideas." As he spoke, he pushed the plate toward Luca.

"I'm not hungry any more," said Luca, lowering his eyes.

"Come on," said his father, "there must be a little room left."

He spoke as usual in a mournful, supplicating tone; but it seemed to Luca, that day, that there was a kind of awareness in that eternally beseeching voice of his father. "No, really, I'm not hungry," he repeated.

"Come on, come on," repeated his father, "come on, Luca . . . eat a little bit of it." And he added facetiously: "Anyhow eat just enough to please Daddy . . . d'you remember," he concluded, turning to his wife, "when he was little that was all you had to say to make him eat?"

"Let him alone," said his mother, "if he's not hungry now, he'll eat it this evening or tomorrow . . . cake keeps well."

But to Luca it had seemed that his father, when he implored him in that way, had said to him "Live!" not

"Eat!" And he felt affection for his father, and pity for himself, at one and the same time. He thought his father must have guessed his secret, not through his intelligence, which was not suited to such matters, but through his goodness—that same goodness which once upon a time had made him appear perfect, adorable, and of which, in Luca's eyes, in spite of disillusionments, he still seemed to preserve some traces. And he was assailed by a strong temptation to accept the cake and eat it, and with it to accept life. But he realized that to accept life in the form of a slice of cake, even though it was offered by his father's goodness, would be a wretched comedown after he had ruined his school career and got rid of all the things he loved; so clenching his teeth, he hung his head over the plate. "Well?" he heard his father's voice insisting, "don't you really want any?" "I'm not hungry," he repeated. And he sat quite still, his head bowed.

There was a moment's silence. "Well, well, it's a pity," said his father, without showing whether he was really grieved by Luca's refusal. "I bought it specially for you . . . so I'll put it on the sideboard . . . and when you feel like it and are sure no one's watching, you'll eat it, won't you?" And Luca felt a flip on his cheek from the father's hand. He shuddered.

This incident left him with a feeling of deep anguish. He was still tied, and not only by the things he had not yet got rid of, but also by those he thought he had destroyed once and for all, such as his filial love. From that day, there grew in him more strongly than before, the desire to relinquish his existence.

Now one of his mother's sisters was taken sick, and in order to spare her all the noise the two families agreed that her children, twin girls and a little boy of eight, should go to their aunt's house. They were accompanied by their governess, an unmarried woman of good family who had formerly been a French teacher. She was a woman of about thirty-five whose shortness was accentuated by the disparity between her narrow shoulders and her big head with its bulging hair. She was not beautiful, with her dull, inexpressive eyes set

level with her face and always dark and bruised looking, her overpale, rather flabby cheeks and her bulging loose mouth, shaded with dark down. But this lack of attractiveness, this appearance of ill health were to a certain extent made up for by the extraordinary vivacity and gaiety of her character. Not merely did she perform quite willingly her humble, tedious duty as a governess, but she brought to it a certain whimsical enthusiasm of her own, playing with her three pupils as though she herself were a child, putting herself on equal terms with them, sometimes wrangling with them or actually bursting into tears if one of them was rude to her. This childishness was in strong contrast with a look of ill-repressed sensuality—more suitable, certainly, to a mature woman than to a child—visible in the tiredness of her eyes, in the slightly suggestive beauty of her hands, and in the softness of her hips. She chattered continually, and her voice was clear and shrill with a mischievous sharpness in it; her talk was interspersed with frequent bursts of silvery laughter. The sitting room next door to Luca's bedroom was assigned to her and the three children for their special use. Therefore, to his own drowsiness and idle fancies there was now added, as further distraction from his work, the noise of his three cousins playing with their governess.

In the morning the governess took the children for a walk in the public gardens; but in the early hours of the afternoon she shut herself up with them in the little sitting room and from then on the noise went on, uninterrupted, till the evening. Sitting at his table, his head heavy with the usual drowsiness, Luca could hear the shouts of the children as they ran about the whole afternoon, the woman shouting and running with them in an unending, untiring agitation and liveliness and gaiety which made his own immobility seem, by contrast, even duller and heavier. Every now and then mysterious bumps, as of overturned furniture or falling bodies, made him jump; these were followed by stifled, joyous laughter. Or he would hear the governess's voice raised loudly and clearly in playful

authority, bidding the children not to make a noise, but after a short pause the din would break out again, louder and more concentrated than ever. The children were boisterous by nature and the young woman stimulated this boisterousness of theirs by the facility of her imagination and the vivacity of her own temperament. Sometimes when the noise was at its loudest the governess would open his door and poke her head in, asking, in a manner half knowing and half hypocritical, whether they were disturbing him. It was an idle question, and seemed merely to be part of a general plan for preventing him from working. Luca would answer, without turning round, that it did not matter, that they could make as much noise as they liked. He was not in the least anxious to work and this childish liveliness was yet another excuse for avoiding it.

But sometimes he felt a desire to join in these amusements, so varied and so different from his own solitary, mournful game, and getting up from his table he would open the door of the sitting room and look in. He would see a scene of disorder and of childish gaiety—chairs overturned, tables pushed aside, the governess on all fours on the carpet with a child riding on her back; and he would stand transfixed in the doorway, watching them while they went on playing just as though he were not there. Then, turning around on the floor on hands and knees with her rider on her back, the governess would look up at him with a laughing face from under the disheveled hair hanging down over her nose, asking him in her usual way whether by any chance they were disturbing him. "No . . . no . . . go ahead," Luca would answer, embarrassed: "I just looked in because I wanted a rest." But the governess had already ceased listening to him. With a vigorous shake she would free herself of her rider, who would roll laughing on the floor; then she would get up, duffled and untidy, and proclaim in a voice of authority: "Now listen everybody . . . we'll play a completely different game . . . but listen, because I shan't explain it twice."

Luca liked the governess because she seemed to him kind and simple and gay, so unlike his mother who, filled as she was with rigid educational theories, would never have dreamed of playing with children in that manner. But a day came when this liking of his was suddenly complicated by a feeling of a different kind. One afternoon, watching her as she caracoled across the room with the little boy on her back, Luca could not help noticing the provoking roundness of her hips as she raised them in the air in an animal-like attitude, and at a movement she made as she turned round toward him his eyes, almost against his will, were attracted to her bosom which through the opening of her blouse was completely visible, including the whole contour of her very white, soft breasts. These breasts hung down like those of an animal and swayed with every movement, and Luca, though he said to himself that it was highly indiscreet to fix his eyes upon them, was quite unable to look away. At that moment she raised her face toward him, frankly intercepted his look and lifted her hand with an instinctive movement toward her breast. But her first modest impulse was arrested by some reflection, and all she did was to smooth back her hair; then, shouting and laughing, she resumed her parade across the room. Luca, noticing the movement, was sure that she had changed and modified it out of coquettishness, and at once he felt deeply disturbed. Still on all fours and with her little rider on her back, she headed for a distant corner of the room. Luca watched her and for the first time could not help thinking it unbecoming that the little boy, as he rode on her back, should beat her on the buttocks with his hands as he might have beaten the crupper of a horse. Perhaps she noticed this look of his, for she gave a sudden shake of her hips in a manner that seemed to him provoking. But this movement caused the child to roll off on to the floor; he hit his head against the corner of a cabinet and burst into tears. At once, transformed instantaneously from animal to woman, she got up, took him by the hand and

led him under the lamp, asking him where he was hurt. Luca went back to his room.

During the days that followed he noticed that he rose more and more often from his table and, under one pretext or another, or without any pretext at all, went and looked in at the sitting room door. He would have liked to produce some sort of a lie to conceal the true nature of his attraction—more for his own benefit than for that of the woman, whom he guessed to be pleased by his curiosity, but unaccustomed to lying to himself, he could not find one. He recognized quite frankly that he looked in at the sitting room door in order to see the governess. And that when he looked in he hoped to see her again in that same animal-like attitude, on all fours, her hips sticking up in the air, her breasts dangling. By this time, however, to be conscious of a pleasure meant, for Luca, to hate it. Therefore, with the same passion with which he had undertaken the sacrifice of his books and his money and the ruin of his school career, he devoted himself to the destruction of this new tie.

At first he tried to gain control of himself and thrust desire from him. But he soon saw that after resisting nine times out of ten he canceled out all the success he had obtained by going the tenth time, and looking in at the door of the sitting room, in an even more awkward and transparent manner than usual. Instinctively, he tried a different method. He looked in as often as he wanted to, but sought to change the nature of the pleasure by observing the woman minutely. It had been at first a genuine though furtive pleasure, gay and thoughtless as the person who inspired it. Now his object was to introduce a new flavor, that of physical and moral disgust. He made use, unconsciously, of the same cunning that had served him in the case of the money and the books; having loved them and loved them too much he had managed to discover, in the sweet depths of that love, the bitterness of a nauseating satiety, of an injurious servitude; and this bitterness had been a powerful aid to him in getting rid of them. By looking without restraint at the woman,

he sought, with a cruelty which he felt to be unjustified and more desperate than ever, to find the defect in this new pleasure of his. But this time, contrary to what had happened in the case of the books and the money, he discovered to his surprise that the tie, far from being severed, had actually become stronger.

The defect lay chiefly in the forbidden, illicit, furtive nature of his contemplation, of which he had been aware from the very beginning without attaching much importance to it. But perhaps the very quality of the pleasure he derived from his contemplation was still the strongest justification of his determination to renounce it. She was not beautiful, as he had at once realized; and this absence of a beauty which might in some way counterbalance the secrecy of desire by the openness of disinterested admiration, might also liberate him from his new bonds. How could he possibly care for those stumpy legs which, when she played at galloping round the room, were visible above the baggy stockings, right up to the luminous, cold whiteness of the thighs? And those breasts, so soft and dangling? And the buttocks, large out of all proportion, giving her a bunched-up look when she was standing, as though in that place her garments concealed not a part of her body but a cumberous shapeless bundle? These reflections brought him a sort of relief; she was really clumsy looking, no longer young, already going flabby, and he hoped that this clumsiness, this maturity, this flabbiness, introducing as they undoubtedly did an element of displeasure into his pleasure, would in the end restrain and deflect its progress. But this did not last long. At a second examination, when he thought he could now look at the governess without feeling disturbed, Luca discovered that she now attracted him just because she was flabby and clumsy and not very young. It was true that there still remained that bitter flavor of disgust that he had wanted deliberately to introduce, but it was no longer a matter for disgust, it was, rather, a new and more exciting cause of attraction. All this, he could not help thinking, had happened without his noticing it, by a

sort of alchemy in the darkest depths of his instinct. He understood, too, that if he had been able by some miracle to transform her and make her young and beautiful, he would not have desired her so much. And so the desire of his senses had proved stronger than his desire for death, and by making ugliness attractive had brought him back in spite of himself into the life that he had wished, at all costs, to leave.

This discovery reduced him to despair, for he also realized that, if these longing glances at her hips and bosom sufficed to bring down the laborious edifice of his sacrifices, they certainly did not suffice to make him live in a positive sense. It was too late now, he thought, he had broken the threads that bound him to life and it was impossible to start over again. What sort of a life would it have been, without affections, without obligations, sustained merely by a few moments of furtive lust?

And then, as though she had guessed his thoughts, the woman herself took the initiative. She would burst into Luca's room, pulling one of the children after her, and let herself fall backward on to the bed, legs in the air, in one of their usual merry wrestling-matches; she would come and look in at his door, when the noise reached its height, in order to apologize. She did these things with boisterous assurance, laughing and joking, but it seemed to Luca that she was not as spontaneous as before. She invented a game in which it was necessary for one of the players to absent himself from the sitting room for a short time, and instead of going into the corridor she went into Luca's room, making the excuse that the corridor was cold. She left the door ajar and went close to Luca without making any noise; suddenly she leant over his shoulder, brushing his cheek with her own. "What are you working at? Latin?" "No, French." "Why, I used to teach French . . . let me see what it is . . . *Corneille*?" Her voice cheerful as it was, seemed to Luca strangely expressionless. And when he turned slightly to answer her, he found her face almost against his own and her big, flat-set eyes gazing intently and smiling at him. Luca noticed

her cheeks sagged a little, they were dusted over with pink powder and shiny under the powder grains; he noticed that this detail pleased him just because it displeased him. Perhaps she felt that his look was cruelly penetrating; for she said, laughing: "Go on with your work!" and with a pirouette went to the door. "Can I come in now?" he heard her shout. The children cried to her to come in and she disappeared.

Next day Luca had just dozed off on the bed, when in the confusion of slumber he suddenly felt three or four gesticulating, clinging bodies fall with disagreeable violence on top of him. It was the governess and her three pupils who, chasing each other, had intentionally thrown themselves upon him. The children and the woman struggled together, laughing and shouting, and in order to free himself, Luca too started struggling. And in this scuffle he discovered that his hands, against his will, instinctively sought the woman's body; and while the children were struggling with all the impulsiveness and violence they were capable of she was apparently seeking him out—anxious to prolong the battle instead of trying to free herself. When she made a movement to shake off the children Luca found one of her legs lying across his face, and this time he was sure she had done it on purpose. It was the calf of her leg, and it bounced against his mouth like a well-turned club of light, soft flesh so that his lips, at every rebound, could feel the vibration of the muscles as she tightened them in order not to hurt him. At last she jumped up from the bed, shouting: "That's enough, everybody! . . . And now I've thought of a new game."

The children calmed down instantly, and the governess said: "Now this is the game: we'll put out all the lights and then we'll draw lots. . . . All except one person will hide, and that person must look for the others in the dark and recognize them . . . but he must guess who the other person is in the dark, without speaking, just by feeling. . . . Of course," she added, turning to Luca, "we must put out the light in your

room too . . . and, if it doesn't bore you to play with children, do come and play with us, just this once."

Luca, smoothing back his disheveled hair, said: "All right," and the governess concluded: "No locking yourselves in . . . and no hiding in wardrobes."

"Can we hide under the beds?" asked the little boy.

"Under the beds—yes, that's all right."

They left Luca's room and went back into the sitting room. The governess wrote down their names on bits of paper, mixed them all up and made one of the twins draw lots. "Luca," she announced, as she unfolded the paper. Luca saw his cousins looking at him with envy. "You must stay here in this room," said the governess, "while we go and hide." Luca nodded and sat down in an armchair near the fireplace.

She went out with the children, turning off the sitting room light as she went, and then the corridor light. Sitting in the darkness Luca listened carefully, he could hear footsteps coming and going, doors opening, whispers, stifled laughter, creakings and bumps. He was completely absorbed in the game now and was trying to make out where the others were hiding. Every now and then a motorcar passing in the street outside threw on the wall a rectangle of bars of light that turned slowly toward the ceiling and then disappeared; and for a moment, in a twilight striped with vivid light, he had a glimpse of the whole room. During one of these illuminations he caught sight of a black figure standing erect in a corner, in the space between the bookshelf and the china cabinet. It was the governess; and Luca thought how cunning of her to hide in the sitting room, which because it was the most obvious place was also the last place he would have thought of. After a moment's reflection, he decided to pretend he was making a careful search in the corridor, whereas he would not really be searching at all; then he would go straight to the corner where she was hiding and shout out her name in a loud voice. He was pleased with this decision; in that way he would show her that he was more cunning than she. Meanwhile from the darkness came the silvery voice of one

of the twins, announcing: "We're ready . . . you can begin."

Feeling his way carefully but swiftly he crossed the sitting room and went into the hall. There he stopped, listening. He did not want to run the risk of finding one of his cousins, and in thus preferring the governess he was conscious for the first time of an intention which had nothing to do with the game. He went over to the umbrella stand and pretended to feel about among the sticks and umbrellas. From a long way came a piping, childish voice repeating: "You're cold . . . you're cold." Luca moved a few steps further, knocking his foot purposely against the leg of a chair, then went back into the sitting room, moving with outstretched arms for the corner where the governess stood.

He had intended to leap upon her, seize her, and immediately shout: "The signorina!" But at the last moment, and not without hypocrisy, it seemed to him that this would be finishing the game too quickly, for not the least important part of it consisted in running your hands carefully over the face of the person you had caught before you recognized him. He had reached the corner now, he stretched out his hands into the void and his fingers came into contact with the outline of a cheek. She neither moved nor breathed —a sign that she was playing her part in the game. His fingers wandered round her cheek, down along her chin towards her neck.

But then, as he touched the dimple in her chin, he suddenly realized that a second game had taken the place of the first; and this second game was not really a game at all, but the usual hankering that impelled him every day to leave his table and look into the sitting room. At this thought, a feeling of strong excitement took his breath away and made his face burn. In the meantime, with a now fully conscious hypocrisy, he continued to run his fingers over her face, as though he had difficulty in recognizing her.

He enjoyed stroking her cheeks, even though he was aware of a flabby softness; in fact, he enjoyed it par-

ticularly for that reason just as he enjoyed the complicity that joined them together, even though he felt it to be slightly ignoble. And so, he thought once again, the repugnance he felt served only to make his desire stronger and more complicated, like a fire that is fed even by the water that ought to put it out. He followed the outline of her mouth and felt under his finger tips the gentle resistance of the down that shadowed her lips and the stickiness of the greasy make-up. This contact too was both agreeable and disagreeable. From her face his fingers moved down to her neck, and Luca was reminded that she had three little folds there, like three necklaces, which made her neck feel wasted. She did not move, and Luca passed from her neck to the upper part of her breast. At this point the governess became impatient at a caress so hesitating, in which the ambiguous nature of the game was too carefully respected in spite of the darkness and of her own encouraging silence: she took hold of his hand and placed it on her bosom. Luca felt the soft, round breast that seemed under his pressure to change shape and seek to escape his hand that she pressed so frenziedly to her; and then, with the sudden eagerness of a long-restrained protest, he shouted: "The signorina!" She at once dropped his hand; there was a great hubbub, lights went on, the lamp in the sitting room was lit and the little cousins came back. "Well done, Luca!" said the governess, coming out of her corner. "He found me almost at once." The children, disappointed, started a boasting competition about the remarkable places they had hidden in, in order to comfort themselves for not having been found. The youngest said: "I hid in the cupboard where the brooms are kept . . . but there was a smell of wax there and it almost made me sneeze." The governess warned them in a severe tone: "Now don't tell us the places where you hid, or the game will be all over at once."

For a time they talked about the surprises of the game, then the governess announced: "Now it's my turn . . . but look out, hide yourselves well . . . because I know you and I'll find you in no time." She seemed

very gay and thoughtless, entirely absorbed in the game. And Luca, as he looked at her, could not help marveling at her duplicity. For this seemed to be not only in her attitude toward him but to extend even to her clothes, to the white silk blouse through which she had made him feel her breast but showed not the slightest sign of crumpling as a result of that violent embrace. Going across to the electric light switch, she added: "Now I'm going to put the light out.... Now quickly, run and hide yourselves."

It was dark again; and Luca hesitated between the two games. He might hide seriously, like his cousins—this was the first game; or he might wait in the corner between the bookshelf and the china cabinet until she found him—and this was the second game, so much more attractive since it was entirely made up of disagreeable things. The first game fitted in with his own permanent game and implied the rejection of this last tie of fleshly attraction and repulsion that bound him to life; the second implied its acceptance. Almost automatically, he started on tiptoe toward the corner by the bookshelf. Another car passed along the street, streaking the walls and ceiling with moving bands of light. Surely the governess, who had not yet left the room, must have seen him.

She behaved exactly as he had behaved. She went out into the corridor, pretended to bustle round and search everywhere, then came back into the sitting room. Luca knew that she was coming toward him by the glowing point of the cigarette between her lips. This red speck, like the planet Mars in a black winter sky, came closer and closer, swaying as it hung suspended at the level of her face. When it was quite near, the little blood-red star moved to the left with a sudden displacement as she took the cigarette out of her mouth. Luca followed it with his eyes and saw it descend a considerable distance; the governess was letting her arm fall to her side. But at the same time a hand slipped in behind his neck with a slow, firm movement like a snake uncoiling. Then, with a mixed smell of tobacco and lipstick, he was conscious of a

warm breath on his face, followed immediately by the sensation of two lips crushing themselves against his.

Even in this kiss—the first of his life—he recognized an ambiguous quality, at once agreeable and disagreeable. The woman's lips, thick and soft, spread themselves over his lips, as though to master them, with an enfolding, circular motion which involved not only the mouth but also the chin and the base of the nostrils. Like the edges of a deep wound, these lips seemed inert and lifeless, forced to spread themselves more by the pressure of the two faces against each other than by any voluntary movement. But from the depths behind the lips came a thing full of energy, muscular, pointed, thrusting itself between Luca's teeth, unclenching them, penetrating violently into his mouth. She curled and uncurled her tongue as though she wished to explore all the intricacies not only of Luca's mouth but of his whole body and was prevented from doing so merely by the shortness of the implement she used; and its wet roughness made him think of the body of a large snail emerging from its shell. Yes, he decided on further reflection, yes, a snail, but a snail gone crazy, indefatigable even though blind, with a vibrant, self-willed vitality such as only an animal can possess. And meanwhile, as the kiss still continued, saliva issued from their confused mouths and trickled down his chin.

Luca had been expecting that she would call out his name, just as he had called hers, thus putting an end both to the game and the kiss. But without taking her mouth from his came closer to him with a lively movement of her whole body, and he realized that though he had reached the point where, more disconcerted than attracted, he would willingly have stopped, she intended to continue. Then from the other end of the flat he heard the squeaky voice of his little cousin calling out: "You're not looking . . . You've made an agreement with Luca . . . it's not fair, it's not fair"; and in that cry he seemed to hear the voice of his own innocence at the very moment of its destruction by the fires of sensuality. The governess suddenly left him

and stumbled across the room, saying in a gay voice: "Why isn't it fair? I'm still looking." Still panting, Luca took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his wet chin.

The governess' search did not last long. There was a cheerful clatter and Luca knew that she had found one of his cousins. As before, the lights went on and the woman and the three children came back into the sitting room. Luca was quite bewildered by his own discordant sensations. During the kiss, the feeling of repulsion had been stronger than usual, so much so that it almost completely swamped the feeling of pleasure. And yet it was that very repulsion that kindled a burning, impure flame of desire in his blood. He felt that he wanted to kiss her again, and in exactly the same way, with those same sensations. But when the lights went off again, he walked firmly out of the sitting room with a spontaneity that surprised him, and hid in the kitchen, behind the stove.

From there he could hear more than one person walking about in the corridor; besides one of the little girls who was seeking those who had hidden, there must also be the governess seeking for *him*. He was conscious of a sharp pain, as though at the destruction of some beloved living thing which he held more precious than life itself. Time passed, and the confusion in the corridor continued; she was searching for him, and he, behind the stove, felt a strong desire to go to her and take her in his arms. The kitchen door opened, and Luca, filled with joy, seemed already to feel her hand against his cheek. But at the same moment there broke out the usual delighted clatter; the little girl had found her brother. "Ah, you were there," said the governess, as she turned on the light and looked at him from the doorway with an expression at the same time both sly and disappointed.

This time, however, the game came to an unexpected end, as children's games generally do, in sudden boredom and confusion. The little boy was complaining that he had hit his head against a cupboard, and a quarrel broke out between the twins, one

of whom burst into tears. For a short time Luca stood watching the governess who, taking no notice of him, but gay and lively all the time, was calling her pupils to order; then, seeing that the game was really over, he went to his room and threw himself, in the dark, on his bed.

For some time he could hear the four of them laughing, chasing each other and moving furniture in the sitting room. Finally he dropped off to sleep; but at a sudden silence woke up and saw the door opening and the governess, in a streak of light, coming into the room. In the sitting room the children were talking quietly, a sign that they were getting dressed to go away. She came up to the bed and bent over him, saying: "Were you asleep?"

"Yes," answered Luca, half rising.

"Why don't you come and see me at my place?" she went on, in a low voice. "I don't go to your aunt's on Sundays . . . come and see me next Sunday."

"Where is it?" Luca asked mechanically.

Softly she told him the address, in a confidential voice in which nothing of her accustomed gaiety remained. Then she bent down and for one moment, in a very swift contact between their two mouths, Luca felt again all the sensations of the former, longer kiss. "I'm coming, I'm coming," she shouted as she flung herself toward the door. Luca let himself fall back upon the bed.

THAT HAD BEEN ON THURSDAY. More than once during the following three days Luca decided to go and not to go, to yield to love and to reject it. There were a number of reasons—all the reasons, in fact—in favor of accepting; for rejecting there was no reason except that desperate desire to destroy the things that bound him to life—and that was not so much a reason as a point of honor which had an obscure origin and

growth in the most secret depths of his spirit. He perceived that the governess with her love desired him to live neither more nor less than his parents with their gifts, or his teacher, with his tasks. This love was pleasing to his senses, just as his parents' gifts were pleasing to his covetousness and his teacher's tasks to his ambition. They were all on the same level—his mother, his father, his teacher, the governess—all trying to drag him into the midst of life, to impose life upon him, to compromise him with life; and it mattered little if the methods were different and if his father and mother and the teacher would have disapproved of the methods adopted by the governess.

The thing that irritated him most was that the hunger of his senses should so easily overthrow his desire for liberation and death. At that time the two cats that belonged to the house, a male and a female, had entered upon their love period. This had happened before, but Luca, apart from watching them with amusement, had paid little attention. Now, after what had happened between him and the governess, he seemed to recognize himself in the male and her in the female. Just like these two animals, which at one moment followed each other round, sniffing, then faced each other, staring and miaowing, then jumped on each other, the tomcat seizing the other by the neck with his teeth, the female prostrating herself under the male in the same way he himself, unconsciously obedient to the commands of instinct, had behaved toward the woman. All those comings and goings between his own room and the sitting room, those contacts, that invention of pretexts that would lead to contacts—what else were they but the mutual pursuit of two animals mysteriously troubled by desire? With this difference, however, that the two cats could not rebel against nature because they consisted of nothing but nature; whereas he resented this obedience as an act of humiliating passivity, and the force which imposed it as a tyranny. Furthermore, if he yielded to his senses what reason would he have for neglecting his lessons, for rejecting the joys of possession and vanity, for re-

pudiating affection, for not, in fact, deciding once and for all to play a part in that ready-made world into which his mother, in giving him birth, had introduced him?

He was still hesitating when Sunday arrived. In the morning Luca had decided not to visit the governess; by the time lunch was over he had changed his mind. Conscious at heart of a vague feeling of self-contempt, he announced to his mother that he was going to the movies, and went out. But after a few steps he realized his legs were carrying him in the wrong direction. At the top of the street, against a background of trees, rose the baroque gateway of the public gardens toward which, idly, in the bland light of the early winter afternoon, the first Sunday strollers were making their way. Allowing himself to be drawn along by the sight of the gateway, he went into the garden.

He had not been there since the day he buried the money, almost a month ago, and the nakedness and silence of winter had taken full possession. Only the ilexes had kept their foliage, foliage of an opaque green that gave the impression of ancient metal, cold to the touch; all the other trees raised toward the sky gray, broomlike tufts of straight branches upon which could be seen, here and there, a few tiny yellow leaves which had stuck to the tree by mere inertia. The lawns were bare and parched with not a blade of grass upon them, the seats were deserted, the white marble statues had absorbed the rainwater and revealed, in their dark dampness, the jointures between the many fragments of which they were composed. A green scum, no longer cleft by the toy boats of the children, covered the water in the basins of the fountains. Luca walked along an avenue on earthy gravel that no longer crunched beneath his feet, crossed the big lawn, partly flooded now with wide pools reflecting the sky, and through the grove of trees, reaching the open space. There was the decorative wall with its niches and columns and inscriptions. There was the shady spot, glossy with dead leaves, where he had buried the

money. He sat down on an upturned stone capital and looked around.

He felt himself to be in the grip of an uneasy anxiety, but he was not sorry to feel this because it seemed to keep him from thinking about the governess and from the temptation of going to see her. It was the fantastic uneasiness of irresolution, which enormously exaggerates the alternatives of a dilemma but at the same time makes them appear indistinct and unattainable and which contents itself with merely formulating them, appearing to take satisfaction in an inertia which is not concerned with making a choice. Certainly he wanted to go and see the governess, and equally certain he did not want to; but he felt what pleased him most was neither the one nor the other but what lay in the middle between them—this immobility, this apathy, this dim and muffled peace. He knew that if he faced the temptation actively and frankly, it would utilize the very strength of his opposition and turn it to its own advantage. And so the only thing to do was to quell any possible conflict, to remain quiescent.

But he knew why he had come back to this open space in the gardens. Just as a believer comes back to the temple of his religion in order to strengthen himself in his faith, so by visiting again the place of his most solemn sacrifice, he had wanted to convince himself of the impossibility of turning back from that sacrifice. Consecrated by his sacrifice, the natural temple of a religion in which he alone believed and about which he was totally ignorant, this open space exercised an influence upon his mind. And after a long and mysterious pause, it seemed to him he could see, far away, the figure of the governess, as though she had been a halting-place, now left far behind, on a visible path. How could he ever, for the sake of one or two kisses, have placed in jeopardy all that had constituted the desperate principle of this last period of his life? He thought of his money, and thought with extreme repugnance of the possibility of going, avariciously, and digging it up, and putting it in his pocket again and buying sweets or cigarettes with it. But he

would have performed the same act of self-betrayal if he had gone to see the woman. She was expecting him at her own home, just as his parents expected him at mealtime and his schoolfellows and teachers at school. They all conspired to favor his weakness. What was there left for him to do, if he were to retain his honesty, but to disappoint them?

Meanwhile time was passing. He noticed the light had become perceptibly less. Through the windows in the wall behind him two or three distant roars reached his ears, and he remembered that it was the lions' feeding time. At the sound of that roaring he imagined he could see the gray cement cages, clean but strangely fetid, with their close black bars and behind the bars the huge, shaggy masses of the crouching lions. He seemed to see the small door open at the end of the long corridor beside the cages, and the keeper, in his gray-striped uniform, come through it, pushing by its bars a small cart full of bleeding joints of meat. He hooks one of them on the end of a long pole and throws it from above to the beast which has risen, roaring, to its feet. The red carrion falls with a wet plop on the floor of the cage and the lion is instantly upon it, seizing it with its claws and tearing it to pieces. He crunches the bones in his teeth, pausing every now and then in his meal to lick the carcass amorously with his rasping tongue, as though kissing it. Luca shuddered at the thought of that piece of flesh, once part of a living animal and now a mere dead, shapeless lump, and, remembering how he had once been told that death in the jaws of a wild beast was almost painless owing to that strange, unconscious pity on the part of the beast itself which takes special care to break the victim's spine, he thought he would like to die in that way—to be seized, killed, devoured. The idea attracted him because in such a death there was a fascinating ruthlessness, more complete than in any death at the hands of a man because unconscious and innocent. It was a death in which man became something other than man, in which he was transformed into food for a starving beast. And this blind

and nameless hunger was a worthy sepulchre for a rejected body which could have nothing to do with the world and with mankind, not even through the pity of a tear-stained grave.

But above all he was pleased at the idea of the humiliation inflicted upon human dignity by this use of the human body as food. He remembered that the feeding of the lions in the zoo had always been connected, in his own imagination, with the confused feelings inspired in him by the reading of certain novels concerned with martyrdom, particularly *Fabiola* and *Quo Vadis*. This human dignity, composed entirely of petty honors and repulsive duties, that he hated so much, could not be more completely denied than by placing the human body on the level of butcher's meat. He was reminded of the young virgin, beautiful and of noble birth, who, in one of these books, had been exposed naked to the wild beasts: after she had remained for a long time miraculously unharmed, a lion attacked her and with one blow of its claws tore off her arm; then, still living, she was devoured by the hungry beasts; and there came back to him the feeling of pity he had experienced on reading this episode. But this time the feeling of pity was for himself, as he saw himself thrown down and torn to pieces in place of the young woman. It was the same feeling of pity that had moved him when he had imagined himself murdered and buried in the public gardens; and, in suggesting to him a new picture of his own death, it clarified and confirmed its significance—as of a ritual sacrifice, holy, necessary, inevitable.

He started up as he saw that night had already fallen. He felt frozen from head to foot and he was aware, suddenly, that in truth he was nothing more than a boy who had stayed out later than usual. As he went off down the darkening avenues, in the twilight beneath the trees, he heard the cry of the park keeper, "Closing time . . . closing time"—coming thin and mournful to his ears like a summons back to the world of home and school that he so much hated; and

for a moment he thought of staying in the gardens and spending the night in the open space, in company with himself and the shadows of the trees. But his courage failed him, and he went out through the gateway. Now, however, he was afraid of being unable to resist the governess next day, when he saw her again and she provoked him afresh with her tricks.

BUT NEXT DAY the governess did not come, because, as he learned from his mother that same evening, his aunt was well again and there was no need for the children to be sent away from the house. Luca was aware of a feeling of disappointment, which he attributed at first to surprise—the surprise of a man who has prepared himself for a fight and then finds, at the last moment, that the fight is not going to take place after all. But later he understood that the disappointment was of a different nature; what he really wanted was to see her again. This desire, simple and direct as a natural appetite, frightened him because it proved that he still clung to life and its doubtful gifts.

After his mother had given him the news, five days went by and Luca hoped that he had forgotten the governess. But on the Sunday morning, as he walked past the telephone, he stopped and almost mechanically dialed her number. She answered him at once, as though she had been waiting all those days at the other end of the wire. "You didn't come last Sunday," she said.

"I couldn't," Luca answered; "did you wait for me?"

"Yes, I waited for you . . . but not for long." It seemed to him that her voice was not so gay as usual. And now there could be no further question of resisting the temptation. He asked in a low voice: "Can I come today?"

She seemed to be reflecting for a moment; and then

she replied: "No, not today . . . I really don't feel at all well."

"I understand," said Luca, in an incredulous, angry tone.

She went on immediately, as though frightened: "It's quite true . . . I don't feel well . . . but come next Sunday—can you manage next Sunday?"

"Yes," said Luca.

"All right—till next Sunday, then."

During the whole week Luca, putting aside completely all inclination toward resistance and sacrifice, did nothing but think of the governess. He thought of her with a profound agitation in which were mixed the sharp desire of the senses and the raging bewilderment of defeat. There was certainly no more question of dying—nor yet of living, unless living meant this state of vexation and anguish. Like a swirling, muddy torrent that allows a man neither to swim nor to rest his foot on dry land, passion dragged him far away from his former resolutions. Everything appeared to him to have lost its substance and importance except the woman whom imagination never ceased to exhibit to him in an inexhaustible variety of flattering and disturbing manifestations. The thing that he had so much feared was now happening—that he would find an interest in life again; but after the destruction of so much, it was a life that was reduced to a mere sting of lust, with no hope of expanding into a wider, more positive feeling. For he realized that he did not love, and would never love, this woman, knowing himself to be drawn to desire her by a narrow, purely animal, instinct. How far removed now was he from the clarity of vision he had attained during his last visit to the open space in the gardens! Neglecting his work, eating and sleeping little, his senses perpetually in a ferment and mind filled with nausea, he waited impatiently for those seven days to pass. On the Sunday, after telling his mother the usual lie about going to the cinema, he left home early.

The governess lived in an old quarter of the town, between the station and the barracks. At the ends of

the long streets could be seen black and white sentry boxes and the iron gates of barrack enclosures, and beyond the gates the wide barrack squares surrounded with dusty eucalyptus trees, and above, the white sky. Distant, mournful bugles sounded the call to mess, without any visible response; an air of utter boredom spread outward from the iron gates and rose like a fog over the deserted streets. As he walked hastily through those streets, beside the tall buildings that lined them, he felt his legs giving way beneath him and loathed the impulse that drove him on to make this visit. This quarter of employees' dwellings seemed to him all at once hypocritical: how many other women were hiding behind these ornate, dusty façades as they waited for their lovers or clutched them in their arms? He felt that in spite of his agitation he was doing a perfectly normal thing in going to see the governess, precisely, in fact, the thing that the falsely dignified appearance of the quarter seemed to suggest; and that in the acceptance of this contemptible normality lay the whole of his defeat. It was the normal thing, he reflected, to do one's lessons, to save some money, to have a stamp collection, and finally, at the appropriate age, to go and visit one's mistress in a quarter such as this. He found the house he was looking for not far from the barrack gates. The main door was open, and at the far end of the entrance hall there was an old-fashioned stained-glass window with big lozenges of red and blue. His heart swelling with disgust, his legs trembling, he started up the staircase.

He went up two, three, four floors, stopping at each landing to examine the name-plates. All the time he was thinking of the governess' home and, remembering that her father, who had been dead for years, had been a state official of some distinction, he pictured a series of small, narrow rooms, crammed with all sorts of knickknacks. She would entice him to a shabby sofa in the far corner of one of these little rooms, and from the moment of their first kiss, would remind him, with her indefatigable tongue, of an infuriated snail. Then there would be sweets and cigarettes, languishing

looks and jokes; and finally he would be lying on top of her, at once reluctant and awkward, in a confusion of garments tossed aside like the surf that marks a shipwreck. She would send him away with a last kiss in the darkness of a narrow hall filled with overcoats. He would go home again, both the betrayer and the betrayed. All this filled him with profound repugnance; but, as usual, because it was repugnant it attracted him.

When the maid opened the door he was astonished at the pungent, stuffy smell from the hall that smote his face like a hot breath. The maid ushered him in and left him standing there. At the far end of the hall a reddish light came from a lamp apparently wrapped in a cloth of that color. On the other hand the passage leading off the hall was plunged in darkness, and it seemed to him he could hear muffled sobs coming from that direction. The whole house seemed to be permeated by some inexplicable, sorrowful agitation—light, hurried footsteps, moans, rustling garments, creaking doors. He could even distinguish, in the distance, a monotonous voice in prayer. And the smell, the smell that was so pungent in his nostrils, was the smell of disinfectants, of sleep, of sweat; he remembered the same smell in his mother's room years ago during an illness. A tearful voice close beside him made him start. "Who is it? What do you want?" it said.

In front of him in the darkness, her face and breast catching a blood-red glint from the lamp, stood a fat old woman in black. A big tuft of white hair rose up from her forehead, like a plume of feathers, with an almost comic effect. Luca looked into her face and saw, even beneath the red glint of the lamp, her eyes and her whole face appeared to be inflamed with another, a different, a more fiery red. She repeated her question again and took a step forward, placing herself outside the halo of the lamp. Then, in that uncertain half-light, Luca saw that the redness of her face had remained, and realized that it was the redness of tears shed in

despair and spread all over her face by a soaking, inadequate handkerchief.

Mortified, he spoke his own name, adding hurriedly the lie that he had come to ask for news. The old woman muttered some reply that Luca did not understand, ending with: "She's sick—she's terribly sick"; then she shook her head and disappeared into the darkness from which she had come. Behind the old woman Luca noticed for the first time a white figure that seemed to support her—a nurse. Half closing the door, he went out on to the landing.

He hurried home, ran into his room and threw himself upon the bed. It was not so much pity for the governess, whom he did not love and who had been simply the occasion of his desire, that he felt now, but rather hatred against himself, or at least against that part of himself which had inflicted upon him the humiliation of that indecent chase across the town; ending in so mortifying a manner by his finding a death agony where he had expected a lovers' meeting. And so, he could not help thinking, this was what it meant to live, to go on living—doing, with passion and determination, absurd, senseless things for which it was impossible to find any justification and which continually placed the person who did them in a state of slavery, of remorse, of hypocrisy. He recognized now the wisdom of his reflections of two Sundays ago, in the open space at the gardens, a wisdom which was perhaps desperate, but was the only one possible. With the exception of this wisdom which demanded the sacrifice of his life, all else was contradiction and obscurity.

He felt that the actual facts had taught him, mutely, a kind of lesson and had pointed again to the right road, from which he had been led astray by his desires. It was like a piece of music, that scene of confusion and death in the governess' home, like a motif interrupted for a short time by other, contrasting sounds and then taken up again with greater intensity, on a higher, firmer note. It was the motif that had been sounding in his ears for a long time, and that he had

done wrong to forget. A motif that was profound, deep-toned, funereal, full of sadness, but at the same time bewitching and peculiarly his own.

"And supposing the governess doesn't die?" he asked himself, with an experimental curiosity. Then, observing that, at the mere mention of such a hope, his senses were reawakened, he was seized, all over again and more strongly than ever, with hatred against himself. He was not even capable of wanting the governess to live for her own sake; she must live and die only for him. This too was what living meant, he reflected; and it was in that way his parents understood life, and his teachers and everyone else. Immediately he felt that he wanted her to die; and that he was able to feel this only at the cost of wanting, even more urgently, to die himself.

His parents, speaking of it casually at table with expressions of conventional pity, gave Luca the news of the governess' death two days after his visit to her home. "She was a good creature," said his mother; "so gay . . . who would have thought it?" His father affirmed, too, that he would never have imagined that a person so full of life could have met such an early death. And the conversation, after a few more comments of the same kind, passed to another subject.

Luca had hoped that her death would inspire him with a feeling, if not of pity, at least of liberation. He discovered, instead, that he continued to think of her with desire and longing, just as when she was alive. As far as he could understand the matter, the sensations awakened in him by this woman seemed to have been hoarded greedily by his sensual memory so they might be doled out, day by day, in the small change of recollection—anyhow until some other woman occupied the dead woman's place in his heart. He was reminded of how, as a child, he had once shut up a live

lizard in a box; but the creature had died, and he had insisted on keeping the corpse for several days, until his mother, sickened by the smell, had taken it from him and thrown it away, to his great disgust, for he thought he possessed some remarkable treasure. In the same way, with the same jealous, miserly care, did his memory preserve those two or three amorous sensations which the governess had bequeathed to him and which now smelled of death. And so, to the funereal color that tinged his whole life there was now added the dark shadow of an irresistible necrophilia. And what made it worse than other similar loves for the dead was the fact that he had no idealized love for the complete figure of the governess, but merely, in a sensual manner, for one particular part of her, the only part that had been, for him, alive and effectual—that mouth which now, as he sometimes found himself thinking, must be filled with earth, and which could no longer retain any resemblance to a mouth. In fact he neither remembered nor knew anything of her beyond the kiss that he had received from her; and that kiss, like a smell or a taste which is revivified at even the slightest call of memory, came back to him at every moment not so much in the manner of an obsession as of something that has already become habitual, with the vicious regularity of the most mechanical type of thought. It was a wretched, dismal treasure, but he was preparing to live for years upon its revenue. Sometimes at night he would wake up suddenly with the sensation that her mouth was emerging slowly but surely from his pillow, as a flower emerges from the earth, the linen turning into flesh and the flesh, nevertheless, preserving the quality of linen. He would bite hard into his pillow and, until he was quite wide awake, would, with his teeth on edge, grip the cold, saliva-soaked stuff, clinging with all his strength to this hopelessly improbable, but at the same time violently concrete, illusion. So the old mixture of disgust and pleasure continued. This time, however, the disgust was no longer that of a love furtive and impure but partly justified by the woman's eager participation; it

was that of a macabre attachment to ragged scraps of a memory cut short by death. It filled all his thoughts with a dreary listlessness. And it brought at the same time, as he realized, a gradual perversion to his senses that were continually oscillating between desire and repulsion. The sensation of the kiss and the idea of death became mingled and fused in a single, obscure excitement which seemed to draw its strength from the deep, overshadowing darkness of impossibility and profanation.

So continued the struggle against the things which bound him to life; and chance had willed that those things were now reduced to the multilated, shapeless memory of a person who was dead. It was a memory, he sometimes reflected, that with time would undergo the same process of disintegration as the flesh which had produced it; and, like that flesh in the earth in which it was buried, so, with extreme slowness, would decompose in the blackest mud deposit of his mind, but not before he had nourished his life upon it for many years, evoking it and relishing it again and again, as long as it was possible. In order to sever this bond and place himself, once and for all, outside the orbit of this memory, he took the streetcar one morning to the cemetery instead of going to school.

He thought vaguely of buying some flowers and scattering them upon the governess' grave—with the idea of propitiating her and of asking her to leave him finally in peace. But, on that cold, misty morning, the cypresses rising above the grey wall of the cemetery at once gave him the feeling that it was a place of convention and show in which any mystery was already discounted in advance. The open iron gates led into the cemetery from a space surrounded by flower stalls. Beyond the gates could be seen the burial ground, like a public garden which, ridiculously, had been planted with crosses instead of flowers. These crosses, as he looked dreamily at them from the open space outside the gates, seemed to be moving confusedly in a whirling geometrical pattern from which all idea of death was excluded. Around him, people were getting off of

crowded streetcars, swarming over the open space, buying flowers, moving gently, with unhurried steps, toward the gates. The mortuary chapel, standing conveniently beside the cemetery, with its portico and pediment in colored mosaics, seemed to invite gestures of prearranged, unmysterious piety. This, he could not help thinking, this was a place for the living to perform their ceremonies with perfunctory decorum and smoothness, not a place for the dead. He noticed that below the wall the ground, cracked and tawny in color, sloped steeply away; and that at the top of this slope three tramps were warming themselves around a bonfire—which he at once imagined, for some reason, to have been kindled with refuse from the cemetery, fragments of bone, rags from rotting garments, splinters from coffins. Tongues of flame flickered red in the cold and misty air, and from the flames a column of smoke rose in yellow spirals up the wall, reaching as far as the inclined, motionless tops of the cypresses. At the sight of these flames there came back to his mind the idea of a death shorn of ceremony and pity—like the deaths he had once pictured at the hands of a murderer or in the jaws of a wild beast—a death which served to warm the hands of three ragged beggars, standing in sight of suburban houses, standing beside the streetcar lines. He realized it was useless to go into the cemetery; the woman was in his memory, in his senses, not beneath the marble slab which bore her name. In face of that slab of stone he, like the others, would have performed empty, senseless gestures; or, on the other hand, in order to bring her to mind, would have had to summon up those very memories that he wished to drive away. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a streetcar appear at the corner of the avenue, and ran, at full speed, to the platform. A few minutes later he was home.

In his room he dropped off to sleep, as usual; and then woke with a violent start which recalled to his mind another similar shock given him by the governess when she had deliberately fallen on top of him in her pretended game with her pupils. It was she,

there could be no doubt of it; and the sensation of that kiss seemed to be emerging, more intense than ever, from the stuff of his pillow. It seemed that the whole of the night that enveloped him was expressive of that mouth of hers, that the darkness itself formed lips and a tongue in a sultry, crackling silence that was filled with an inescapable presence. There was a kind of malicious scorn in this return of the governess after the failure of his expedition to the cemetery; it was as though she wished to inform him, with all the gaiety and boisterousness that had been hers in life, of the vanity of his attempts to set himself free. As though she wished to say to him in her cheerful manner, falling on top of him and kissing him: "You thought I was dead . . . far from it . . . I'm more alive than ever . . . and *you've* got to live—for *me*!" He raised himself on his elbow, enjoying the flavor of the sensation and thinking deeply. It was clear to him that henceforward he would sink, more and more deeply every day, into a darkness from which there was no escape. He was aware that this was not in the least displeasing to him; each step would in fact carry him farther forward toward that ritual sacrifice of himself he had had a presentiment of on that far-off Sunday in the open spaces among the ilexes. From that sacrifice, expressing the obscure but spontaneous religion of his life, would come his liberation—not from a few flowers and a genuflection and the prayer of a hackneyed rite.

ONE MORNING, as he hurried out of the house on his way to school, he detected in his mind a presentiment that some conclusion was imminent. It took the form of a suspension of the thought-process and its lucid workings, of an anxious apprehension of some event which, though it had not yet happened, was already facing him, settled and inevitable. He was conscious of a slight, pleasing excitement; it was as though he

felt himself to be no longer united and indivisible, but separated into a number of parts which floated about and bobbed up and down beside each other, clustered all together in a becalmed stillness, like broken fragments from a shipwreck in the quiet that follows a storm. He noticed he saw things through different eyes than usual; or rather, he did not see them but made himself master of them by means of an altogether new sense which he could not locate and which seemed to be distributed all over his body. Simultaneously, he was aware of a bitter, unreasonable sadness, a sadness of resignation that made his acts wearisome and conscious, as though each act was an irrevocable step upon a fatal path.

The weather was bad but still undecided, with a low, dark sky which had not yet resolved to shed the rain which burdened it. Occasionally a gust of damp wind stirred the mild, motionless air; then Luca would see all the leaves of the trees in the gardens turn over with a flash of silver, while coils of gray dust rose hissing at the street corners from the dry stones of the pavements. But the wind would fall again at once, and the paving stones remained dry. It was a kind of weather that resembled his own state of mind, and it seemed to him they were like each other in the way they both waited for something to happen. In the end, possibly, it would rain; in the end, possibly, he would come to a decision. He felt that it was for him that the sky had clouded over so threateningly; and that he must keep his eye on it in the way that one actor keeps his eye on another so as not to miss the moment when he has to make his appearance on the stage.

The thing that struck him most forcibly was the new feeling that the most ordinary actions gave him—such as walking through the streets, paying for his trolley ticket, getting out of the streetcar. They were the same actions he had performed for so many years on his way to school, except that where as in the past he had performed them without noticing, being carried along while he was performing them by an unceasing current of different preoccupations and thoughts, to-

day, in the utter bareness of his life, the whole of his consciousness, for lack of any other object, was centered upon them; and he felt their ordinariness as an absurd, tyrannical strangeness. This consciousness was concerned not so much with the ultimate object of these actions—such as going to school, which had already seemed absurd to him for a long time—as with the actions themselves taken separately; it was this that was new. Why did he move his legs, why did he avoid being run over by a bus, why did he stop and rearrange the pack of books under his arm, why did he pull his hat down on to his forehead? It was as though ordinary life, reduced by now to a thin envelope of habits which had become automatic and were for that precise reason all the more tedious, were about to slip away from him once and for all, as a snake casts its skin in springtime. And with this sense of the total absurdity of all that up till then had never been absurd, he recognized that the long course of his crisis was coming to an end. There was nothing more to be done but give a slight shake and the irksome membrane would drop away. He guessed that this shake, and nothing else, was the object of his presentiment.

In front of the school building a black crowd of schoolboys was growing visibly smaller each moment as it was quickly sucked in through the ancient gray jaws of the big gateway. He was only just in time, he could not help thinking; and this thought too seemed to him perfectly ordinary—or, in other words, tyrannical and objectionable. Inside the school it was almost dark and the torrent of boys which swiftly flooded the hall, dividing into so many smaller streams, one for each corridor, seemed to Luca to be imbued with a crazy, nervous gaiety, as though his companions were nursing the same presentiment as himself. He reached the door of his own classroom, then he was in the classroom itself, with the professorial chair standing at the far end between two large maps and the three close rows of desks which—just as the chair brought to mind the image of the professor in the act of teaching—themselves suggested the rows of schoolboys in-

tent on listening to him. All was preordained: he was already sitting at his desk although the desk was vacant, and his companions were already seated too, though they were crowding round him, and the teacher had already mounted the platform although he had not yet arrived. The lights were on because the bad weather made it so dark, and the dirty panes in the big windows reflected their thin yellow filaments. Luca went to his desk and around him the other boys arranged themselves in their own places. And now the absurd automatism of his own actions came back to him, and he felt a conscientious desire to give that slight shake in order to see what would happen. The professor of Italian, a small, well-groomed man with a plump, white face, entered and walked across the room, scattering silence and attention as he went to his desk. He mounted the platform and turned to face his class, who had risen to their feet. "Sit down," said the professor. And then, with that sensation of taking the plunge that initiates a game, Luca remained standing.

The professor, meanwhile, had sat down; he rubbed his hands together, took a clean handkerchief from his pocket, unfolded it, blew his nose, replaced the handkerchief and arranged himself more comfortably in his chair—all without taking his eyes off the school register that lay open on his desk. Luca could not help thinking that if he had been in the place of the professor he would have regarded it as an intolerable tyranny to perform those gestures which were repeated every morning, themselves the prelude to other gestures which, again, were always the same. In the meantime he still remained on his feet. The professor, having examined the register, looked up at the classroom, saw Luca and asked quietly: "What is it, Mansi?"

"Shall I, shall I not, answer?" Luca wondered. Then he said in a clear voice: "Nothing."

"If it's nothing, then sit down." The professor had an ugly voice, cold and precise; it was obvious, nevertheless, that he liked to hear himself speak.

This time Luca did not open his mouth, and he re-

mained standing. The professor, slightly surprised, looked at him and then repeated: "Did you hear? Sit down."

Again there was silence. The whole class was now looking at Luca with breathless astonishment. The professor stared at him, and added, in a softened voice: "Is there anything you want to say?"

"I've nothing to say," answered Luca, and suddenly sat down. A sigh of relief passed over the class. The professor eyed Luca closely for a moment and then without saying a word, turned back to his register. The lesson was on the *Purgatorio* of Dante, and the professor's usual custom was to choose one of the boys who had good diction and make him read a *canto*, or part of a *canto*, aloud. Then his commentary would follow. The professor's finger ran down the list of names in the register, and Luca was almost sure that it would be himself who would be chosen as reader on this occasion. There were three reasons for this: first, because he read extremely well; second, because it was some time since he had been called upon to read; third—and this was the chief reason—the little incident that he had caused by remaining on his feet had, so to speak, marked him out among the crowd of his fellows and drawn the professor's attention to him.

The professor's finger could be seen running down the first column of names; then it stopped at the beginning of the second. "Mansi," he said.

Another professor, thought Luca, would have perhaps added some joke or witty remark connecting the incident with the summons to read aloud—some such phrase as: "Seeing that you're so fond of standing on your feet, you'd better come up here and read." But this professor was serious and never made jokes. He was one of those teachers who despise their profession and teach in a condescending, detached manner, though with scrupulous care, as if they wished it to be understood that they could do better if they chose. Now, however, for Luca it was a question of deciding whether he was going to obey the summons.

His desk-neighbor was anxiously handing him the

volume of the *Divina Commedia*, already open at the right place, while the professor was quietly turning over the pages of his own copy. Teachers and schoolfellows, thought Luca, they all wanted him to live, to go on living. The thought of the governess came into his mind and he felt himself strengthened in his own decision. For the moment he would obey; but as soon as the feeling of the ordinariness of his own actions came over him again, then he would disobey. He realized that it was only by giving this disobedience the mechanical, punctilious character of a game that he would have the strength to carry it through. He took the book, left his desk which was one of the last at the back of the room, and walked toward the platform.

He noticed that the light had grown visibly dimmer. The first drops of rain were flying against the windowpanes, flattening themselves into broad liquid patches from which other smaller drops trickled down in brilliant lines. Suddenly he saw himself walking calmly toward the platform, book in hand. And at the same moment he stopped.

He stood still, the raindrops streaked the windowpanes, the professor and the class looked at him. At last the professor asked: "Well, what are you doing, standing there like a post?"

Luca was now wondering how long he would be able to stand there like that without incurring a punishment. But even a punishment seemed to him preferable to the usual automatic obedience. With a punishment, at least, the profoundly coercive nature of life was fully revealed, with no more hypocritical pretences. Then he heard the professor repeat, in the silence: "I'm speaking to you . . . answer me . . . do you feel ill?"

A confused murmur ran through the room, cut short immediately by the professor tapping with his ruler on the desk and shouting: "Silence!" But it was time now. With an effort Luca said, "It's nothing"; and felt that his legs were carrying him forward toward the platform. Again there was a whisper of low voices, and for the second time the professor commanded silence,

but without tapping the ruler and in a less imperious tone of voice. Then he turned toward Luca and said shortly: "Read from line 85 of Canto V." Luca lowered his eyes to his book and began:

> Then said another: "Prithee, and so be that desire
> Satisfied which draws thee up the lofty mount
> With kindly pity help my desire.
> I was of Montefeltro, I am Buonconte . . ."

Luca had always been an excellent reader; and the professor, at the sound of his voice reading calmly and with expression, seemed to become calm again himself. And a breath of relief passed through the class, too, in the darkening air. Luca went on reading in a strong, clear voice. In the meantime, however, his mind, as though endowed with a new sense of ubiquity, jumped, so to speak, out of his head and went to the other end of the schoolroom, where, along the wall, hung hats and coats; and from there it looked at him. And thus began again that feeling, at the same time both painful and pleasant, of ordinariness seen under an aspect of strangeness and oppression. Yet he seemed to be reading with vigor, following the meaning of the words which was curiously in harmony with his own feeling. He remembered those many times that he had desired and wooed a death that should be secret, unknown, solitary, obscure. And at the lines:

> There where its name is lost,
> Did I arrive, pierced in the throat,
> Flying on foot, and bloodying the plain.
> There lost I vision, and ended my words
> Upon the name of Mary; and there fell I,
> And my flesh alone was left . . .

a sudden feeling of obscure, distorted pity clutched at his throat. It was the pity toward himself that had moved him the first time he had thought of being killed and buried in the public gardens; and it rose to the surface of his consciousness like a summons to a grave and melancholy, but inevitable, duty. He went on

reading in a voice that was less firm, but deep and full of feeling. The idea that it was a game persisted in the form of a desire to be obstinate and disobedient; but it was strangely mixed now with that sharp, surprising sense of pity. He read a few lines more and then wondered whether he should continue, knowing well that the putting of that question to himself meant that he was going to stop. And, in fact, at the line "Then when day was spent, he covered the valley with mist . . ." he broke off.

There was a moment's silence. "Well?" asked the professor. Throughout the room there had fallen the breathless quiet that awaits some unusual event. Everyone was looking at him and the professor. But Luca no longer either saw or heard anything. He was thinking that he was Buonconte, lying dead at the joining of two rivers. He seemed to see rain-burdened clouds driven by the breath of an icy wind, coming in gray drifts from the invisible top of the mountain down to where he lay, wrapping his body in silence and mist. Then, through the mist, it began to rain upon him and all around him; and the rain riddled the soaked ground and spread, in boiling whirlpools, into a lake of swollen, rioting water which joined the swell of a flooded river, and rising, lifted his half-submerged body and carried it away. And as the dense rain continued, he slipped down through the raging water, flat on his back, his arms outspread. He felt a sudden, sharp pain; and hearing his name spoken, raised his eyes; two tears slid down his cheeks.

The professor was looking at him with contemptuous surprise: "May we be allowed to know what is happening?" he asked. "Are you going to read, or are you not?"

It was clear then, thought Luca, he must go on being a schoolboy right up to the end; even if he wanted to die. He waited a moment and then asked: "Am I to go on?"

An intense chatter of criticism ran through the darkened classroom. The professor made a sign for the class to be silent, then turned to Luca and said:

"Where d'you think you are? Of course you're to go on."

His emotion persisted; the tears had stopped halfway down his cheeks and were tickling him disagreeably. "I shall read down to the end of the Buonconte episode," thought Luca, "because it's *my* episode... Then I shall stop." He pulled himself together and started to read again, in a voice made stronger and clearer by the intimate certainty that he was describing the death, not of a character from Dante, but of himself. It seemed to him that the professor was not so much listening to him as looking at him with curiosity. The other boys, too, looked as though they expected some new strangeness on his part. He read two more stanzas without stumbling, and then, as he had foreseen, at the line "...then covered and wrapped me with its spoils," he stopped again.

This time the whole class burst out in a confused clatter of voices that were almost exultant though at the same time alarmed. The professor made no attempt to calm the tumult; but, turning toward Luca, said, in his normal voice: "You're not well... get your things on and go home... we'll talk about it later, in a few days."

"I'm all right," Luca would have liked to answer; but he felt a shiver run all over his body, followed by a wave of damp, feverish heat, and he saw that perhaps the professor was right. And so, he reflected, if you don't agree to be what other people want or believe you to be, you either get punished or you're thought to be ill. This reflection absorbed him while he gathered the books that his neighbor, with pitying, alarmed solicitude, took from under the desk and handed to him one by one. Everyone was looking at him in silence. The rain was streaming down the windowpanes now; and Luca could not help saying to himself that it was the same rain which he had seen, in imagination, enveloping and carrying away his own lifeless body. He took the books under his arm and went toward the back of the classroom. Thirty heads turned to watch him as he went. "Loiacono," said the

professor, calling on another of the class. Luca took his overcoat, opened the door and went out.

He hurried through the deserted corridors. Through the open doors of the other schoolrooms he could see rows of desks with attentive students sitting at them; he could hear, lonely in the surrounding silence, the voices of the teachers as they lectured. They were voices like those of priests praying mechanically in some chapel, and the echo from the big rooms made it impossible to distinguish the meaning of the words. He went down the stairs and stood looking out into the street, in a sudden, drenching freshness. It was raining heavily, the pavements were gurgling with water, there was a rain-streaked whiteness in the air; and through that whiteness and those streaks of rain there quivered the intense brilliance of a flash of lightning. He heard thunder in the distance, then nearer, a rumbling uproar like a landslide of loose rocks, ending in a sharp burst which seemed to be the signal for a renewed downpour of rain. Then he stepped out from the doorway and started walking bareheaded through the deluge.

The rain seemed to have transformed the whole town into water. The houses were made of upright, gray water, the pavements of yellowish, gurgling water, the dim, shadowy forms of passers-by running to take shelter under doorways seemed also to be made of water, as were the lamp-posts that undulated like thin, black snakes and the greenish masses of the streetcars that swelled out as they approached from the far end of the street. The rain poured down in one direction and then, as the wind changed, in another—methodically, it might have been said. Luca felt the water running from his hair down the back of his neck, and inside his shirt, down his back. The books under his arm were soaked. He stepped in a puddle up to his ankle. After that he had, at every step, the disagreeable feeling of his foot squeezing out water inside the swollen, slippery confinement of his shoe. And so, walking slowly in water and through water, he reached home.

Once in his own room, he threw himself on the bed and started trembling all over. The trembling shook his body uncontrollably, from head to foot; inside his mouth his teeth made a loud, rattling noise, as though he had two rows of dice in his head. His whole body was aching; and at moments an intense heat, which seemed as if it were lined with ice, ran through him and took possession of his face.

He heard the door open but did not move; he was lying flat on his back, his head at the bottom of the bed and his feet on the pillow. "What are you doing? Whatever's the matter? Why aren't you at school?" he heard his mother asking. "I think I'm sick," he answered unwillingly. He felt a hand on his forehead and then heard his mother exclaim: "Why, you're burning hot... You must get into bed at once." At that moment the bells of the church near by began to strike midday.

LUCA'S ILLNESS LASTED for almost three months. During the first month, although he had a very high temperature all the time, he remained perfectly lucid, even though—as he sometimes seemed to realize—this lucidity, for the very reason that it concerned itself with a condition that was unhealthy and feverish, was of an abnormal intensity and not infrequently deviated into violent excitement and wild talk. He no longer wished to die; he was certain that he *would* die and that certainty satisfied him. Convinced that death was imminent, all he had to do was to watch its progress and take a secret pleasure in it. He no longer hated himself, as at the time when he had despaired of his own ability to pursue the policy of revolt to its utmost conclusion; instead, he had a feeling of victorious contempt for these forces in himself which still resisted and still wished to bind him to life. They were the forces which had made him love his studies, his par-

ents, the governess; and which now, deprived of their former props, clutched, before they sank, finally, in death's black flood, at the last straws—the broth which the servant made him swallow, spoonful by spoonful, the ray of winter sunshine that reached him where he lay, his mother's distressed eyes, his father's perturbed, anxious expression. He wished to die and he was sure that he was going to die; but when his mother said to him, in an unhappy but encouraging voice: "Come along, eat a little more . . . it'll help you to get well," those despicable forces prevented him from answering as he would have wished: "But I don't want to get well; I want to die"; and they compelled him, in spite of himself, to smile and to open his mouth. Then he would console himself with the thought, that, after all, these were concessions to other people's lives, not to his own, which by now had cast anchor and departed once and for all from those wretched shores beside which it had dallied for so long.

Under these conditions, the duplicity which had entered into his life from the day when death had appeared to him as the only solution to the problem of his relations with the world—that duplicity now became intensified till it attained the kind of shrill coherence of a comedy of errors. With his parents he played, in a docile manner, the now entirely detached role of the invalid who is going to get well, of the scholar who is going to return to his studies, of the boy who is going to grow up and become a man; but, the moment he was alone, he became merely the dying man, fully conscious and contented, who watches for the approach of his end with a mind filled with hope. He enjoyed taking his own temperature early in the morning, and seeing the shining column inside the thermometer leap rapidly up to the highest degrees; he enjoyed, during the long afternoons, the feeling that his sickness was getting the better of his consciousness, as he lay in a feverish torpor; he enjoyed, during the night, the idea that one of those brief snatches of sleep, full of sweat and fever, to which now and then he abandoned himself, might, without his knowing it,

transform itself into death. His longing for death had by this time acquired a peculiar intensity and concreteness; it almost seemed that he longed for death with the sensuality with which, once upon a time, he had longed for the embraces of the governess. To die, it sometimes occurred to him, was perhaps the one true pleasure that life reserved for mankind.

Sometimes his mother would make plans for his future. "After you leave school," she said one day, "you must take your degree.... If you go in for law, you can work with your father and inherit his clientele and his chambers.... And then, when the right moment comes, you must marry a girl of good family.... But before you get married it would be a good thing for you to travel a bit so as to see something of the world. Your father and I agree about this.... You must go to France and England; in that way you'll familiarize yourself with the languages, too, by speaking them on the spot..."

"But it costs a lot of money to travel like that," said Luca, pretending to take these programs of his mother's seriously.

"Well, we'll give it to you," answered his mother proudly; "we're comfortably off... You shall never lack money, provided it's for useful purposes."

"But I shall not merely *not* take a degree, *not* travel, *not* get married," Luca would have liked to shout; "I shall not even, ever again, put my feet on the ground." However, though his mother's obtuseness and assurance aroused in him an access of fury, so that he was conscious of his heart beating twice as fast and his teeth grinding together in spite of himself, he succeeded in controlling himself and answered, in a voice of childish covetousness: "But I should like to go to Germany too."

Certain details of everyday life which had once appeared to concern him closely and to be, in themselves, commendable, now seemed to him to have been thrust away into a remote distance—for example, the newspaper which his father came and read in his room directly after meals. As he looked at his father's figure

outlined against the background of the window, and at the newspaper which he held open in his hands, he was filled with disgust for the world in which that newspaper was published, bought and read. This was not so much on account of the futility (which, by now, he discounted) of the things that the newspaper contained, as of the absurdity of the object itself and of its use—that sheet of light, stretched material, covered with black marks, over which his father silently ran his eyes. That was the world in which an infinite number of such things, both unjustified and unjustifiable, were accomplished, the world in which everything went on without any purpose, automatically, through force of inertia; and it was pleasant to think that he would soon be leaving that world. Only once did he allow his thought to be seen—and for one moment it became single instead of double—when his mother, thinking to amuse him, started looking for his stamp collection. He allowed her to rummage about for a little, to no purpose, and then said: "It's not there any more. I gave it away."

"What? You gave it away?" his mother could not help exclaiming, in a sudden, indignant outburst. Then she seemed to recollect that Luca was ill and added, in a gentler voice: "But why did you give it away? Whatever came into your head?"

"I gave it away because I knew I was going to die," Luca answered, in a barely audible voice.

It was only partly true; actually he had got rid of his stamp collection not because he knew he was going to die, but because he wanted to die. But his mother was alarmed and, after a quick, brief glance at him, said, with almost her old hardness: "Now don't talk nonsense... What d'you mean, you're going to die? You're going to get well."

Luca seemed to recognize in those words the whole of the tyranny against which he had struggled for so long; and, when his mother had gone out of the room, he said aloud, in a tone of defiance: "Who says I'm going to get well? I'm going to die and I *shall* die."

During the whole time, however—as, indeed, before

he fell ill—the longing for death never appeared to him in the guise of a suicidal impulse. If someone had spoken to him of suicide he would certainly have been surprised, since not even the word, still less the deed, had ever entered his mind. Even in the languor of illness, his longing for death appeared to him in much the same way as it had appeared whenever he had thought about it with clarity and determination—as a necessary sacrifice, the inevitable conclusion of a series of other, minor, sacrifices. This sacrifice struck him as a bitter one; but its bitterness was not of the kind that is inspired by an unjust fate, rather it was the bitterness felt by someone who is aware of his own weakness and loneliness in face of an overwhelming task and who knows that he can perform that task only at a high cost to himself—an unutterable bitterness, mingled with an indescribable joy, as though he knew that he was attaining in death an aim that he had pursued all his life. What that aim was, he could not have said; but he knew for certain it was an act of love, if only because it compelled him to hate so fiercely.

One night he thought he was really dying, or, to be more exact, that he understood the real meaning of his own longing for death. He was asleep; then suddenly he woke up with a painful shock, feeling his whole body—light, now, in its thinness—start violently up, just as a withered shrub starts up out of the ground when pulled by the hand that comes to uproot it. He looked around and then, by the light of the nightlamp on the little table by his bed he discerned a new and painful intensity in the general look of the room. It was as though a dense and growing vibration had forced all the objects in the room outside their usual limits, and the air seemed rarefied and filled with flashes of light. Although they still retained their own likenesses, the furniture and the other things appeared to be fraught with meaning and to have assumed a hostile, threatening expression. They did not speak, but it was as though they were whispering among themselves in low, malevolent voices. Such an intensity—as of people who, without moving or uttering a word, allow the

threatening feelings that fill them to ooze out unmistakably—had the effect of shifting reality to a painful remoteness, and for the first time suggested to him the idea of death as a magical operation allowing him to create a world less absurd, more lovable, more intimate, in which all things would be justified by love. He understood that he owed it, not so much to himself as to the reality outside himself, to die, in order to give that reality a harmony and bring it to life. That cupboard, that chest of drawers, that bookshelf, the whole of this room—and in the same way his parents, his school, his teachers and his schoolfellows, he himself lying there in bed—all these were something that he had experienced in a dream during all the years of his life, as one experiences an obscure and horrible nightmare into which, whatever efforts one may make, one cannot succeed in introducing any order or sense. At his birth he had not, in reality, begun to live, but rather to dream fearful and absurd dreams. Yes, it was essential for him to die, he thought, to take advantage of the nightmare's greatest intensity to cry out once and then awake.

He remembered having experienced the same sensation of nightmare on that far-off night when, standing in the doorway of his parents' bedroom, he had seen them in their night clothes, their arms full of money, taking down the picture of the Virgin from the wall and uncovering the steel safe. And he understood that it was for them he wanted to die, and for the world of which they formed part, so as to free himself from that feeling of hatred and absurdity with which they inspired him and which prevented him from loving them as he would have liked. He felt that the act of dying really depended only on himself and was a thing very easily undertaken, now that he knew he was dying not for himself but for others; and a faint, contented smile came to his lips. As he lay beneath his pile of well tucked-in blankets, he could feel the high fever wrapping his limbs in a burning veil of sweat. With the sensation of yielding himself up to death he

closed his eyes and fell asleep, the smile still on his lips.

BUT INSTEAD OF DEATH came delirium. An assembly of corpulent animals with long snouts sat gravely round his bed, like so many doctors at the bedside of a dying man. They swayed their heads backward and forward, then, like dogs around a bone, threw themselves down on their knees around the bed, stretching out their snouts on top of the bedding. Luca was terrified by these snouts, which were long and flexible, gray and dry and cracked, with occasional bristles here and there standing straight up like pins. At the end of each bristle there was a kind of sucker with quivering eyelashes all round it, and, in the middle of the eyelashes, an eye, sparkling like a diamond, staring at him. The largest and most important of these great animals was at the foot of the bed and stretched out its snout between his legs. Twisting and undulating, the snout grew longer and longer and reached up toward his stomach; and he, weeping and shouting, seized it with both hands and tried to turn it aside. But the snout, though flexible, was hard, and increased in size as he held it in his hands, and reached up toward his face. In the meantime there appeared, on the wall near the door, a number of green excrescences shaped like crooked fingers, which multiplied rapidly and finally formed a cascade of those plants known as "witches' claws," which have upturned, clawlike tendrils. The plant hung down in the place where the coatstand usually was; it looked as if it had grown out of a wide, black crack, in the shape of an ear, which had opened in the wall. Now a wide-brimmed black hat flew about in the air and hung itself up on one of the clawlike excrescences of the plant. Other hats followed it through the pallid air, as though thrown by a skillful hand—men's hats, large and dark and round, women's

hats, small, sparkling with sequins, adorned with feathers of different colors, hats of strange fashions such as had never been seen. All these hats fell on the plant, covering it, hiding it completely. And then the whole hat-laden plant detached itself from the crack in the wall and, like an enormous lizard covered with armor from head to tail, started moving about rapidly, here and there, running up and down the wall.

It looked as if it were trying to get down on to the floor in order to hurl itself against Luca's bed, but luckily the room was half full of black, motionless water, and every time the creature reached this water it drew back with obvious disgust, and ran up to the ceiling again. Long black snakes, thin and graceful, were emerging from the water, swaying their flattened heads this way and that; while a great purple bird flew heavily above them, starting from one corner of the ceiling, swooping down to the surface of the water and then rising again toward the opposite corner. Several times the bird skimmed over the bed, and Luca could see its head, with a round white eye which looked as though it were made of glass and a massive curved beak. The bird dived down, seized one of the snakes in the point of its beak and pulled it out of the water, then flew upward again. The snake twisted and turned in the air like a fluttering ribbon as the bird pulled it back and forth over the room. But from the crack in which the coatstand-plant had grown there now opened a deep cleft which zigzagged upward across the wall and continued across the ceiling. Inside this cleft there soon appeared an intensely thick swarm of brown, shiny insects; one of these insects dropped from the ceiling on to the bed, between Luca's legs, and then another and another, then a whole cluster of them, and then hundreds and thousands of them, until the air was darkened. The entire bed was now covered by a wriggling carpet and he was shouting for someone to take them away and pushing back the carpet of insects with both hands as it seemed to be rising up toward his stomach. At his cries, the carpet rolled itself up at the bottom of the

bed and remained there, motionless, like a great swarming cylinder.

His attention was attracted by a new peril. Inside the medicine bottles that crowded the little table by his bed were enclosed a number of horrible little bald, hunch-backed dwarfs that stuck out their discolored heads or, more often, their thin arms and long, claw-like hands. Another of these little dwarfs appeared out of an egg that lay on a dish, breaking one end of the egg and poking its head out like a disgusting chicken; its thin legs stuck out at the other end and the dwarf started staggering about, wearing the eggshell like a shirt. Yet another of them was sitting astride the rubber bulb of a glass dropper, and as the bulb was pressed down, Luca could see some blackish substance running up and down inside the glass tube. At a stronger pressure, a third dwarf popped out and at once began putting out its tongue at Luca, dancing about and sniggering and holding with both hands its swollen, whitish paunch which looked like that of a fly when it is carrying eggs. More of these manikins were chasing each other among the medicine bottles, brandishing weapons which turned out to be the forks and spoons that Luca used. They did not really disgust Luca, indeed they almost amused him—except that they seemed to him dirty, and after seeing them come out of the bottles and handle the spoons and forks he thought that both medicines and food would be infected. So he pushed away the medicines and the food with signs of disgust, shouting and weeping; and found comfort in the gestures of approval which were made to him from the wall by a holy old monk with a beard. It was true that, from the wall in front of him, there projected, in contrast, the naked belly of a woman, white and swelling, taut as a drum, with big red ears at each side and a small triangular black beard in the groin beneath it; but he took no notice of it, and had eyes only for the face of the monk, so benign and reassuring. But suddenly a smile came over the old man's face, he opened his mouth, and with an unexpected grimace, stuck out his tongue. It was the governess'

tongue, black and rough and moist, and at the end of it trembled the thin horns of a snail; and this snail, projecting from his mouth to an extraordinary length, waved about in the air for a little, extending its horns, then curled back upon itself and started gently stroking the monk's face, reaching up to his nose and forehead. It was a truly enormous snail and it went on and on coming out of his mouth and never stopped stroking the venerable brow framed in white hair, reaching up between the eyes which still gazed at Luca in a serene, benevolent manner. At the same time, on the other wall, the woman's belly split open at the navel and from the gash appeared a knee, as though someone shut up inside the belly was struggling to get out, without success. Then the knee disappeared and a complete naked leg protruded itself cautiously from the gash, the foot stretching down toward the floor . . .

He was continually imploring his parents to deliver him from these unbearable presences; but his parents were not there and he could hear, instead, hissing, intense voices, as of numbers of frantic theatrical prompters, whispering meaningless words hurriedly into his ear. Or there would be sudden loud bursts of tolling bells, their hollow vibrations clashing in the trembling air. A shrill whistle, dry as the sound of compressed steam escaping through a valve, never ceased to make itself heard in a distant corner of the room. And he was shouting for them to turn off the gas, otherwise they would all be asphyxiated.

But all the time, even as he lay helpless beneath the nightmares of delirium, he had the sensation that he was making some progress among his hallucinations, like a traveler among the tree trunks and shadows of a forest, toward an opening that he could not fail to find. And then one day, sitting beside him, in the act of supporting his forehead with one hand and feeding him with the other, he saw a woman whom he did not know but who, manifestly, was not one of those imaginary figures of delirium but a person of flesh and blood. Her head was wrapped, it seemed to him, in a kind of white turban, beneath which her face looked

brown and somewhat wasted but well-preserved, like that of a middle-aged woman meticulously made up. This face was held erect, with a birdlike vanity, upon a long, rounded neck; and when he stammered out some confused words of thanks, the carefully made-up eyes, drowned in their paint and their wrinkles, held a spark of sympathy, while the mouth widened in a brilliant, pathetic smile, showing teeth of a doubtful whiteness, of which two were gold. It was the nurse, as he learned later, whom his parents, frightened by his delirium, had engaged to watch beside him night and day. And what he had at first sight mistaken for a turban was a nurse's cap. A white light, which he realized must be that of noonday, streamed through the window; and beside his bed a screen, usually to be found in the drawing-room, appeared to be concealing another bed. He made a movement as though to show that the light tired his eyes; and the woman at once rose and went to the window. She was all in white and Luca saw that that small, well-preserved head of hers, like the head of some Oriental bird, was set upon a massive body whose ungainly shapes were broadly displayed by the extreme neatness of her dress. She lowered the blind, plunging the room into a pleasant semidarkness, then came back and sat by the bed, putting out her hand again to support Luca's forehead while with the other she held out the spoon. Luca saw that her hands were long and brown and dry, with painted fingernails. On the little finger of one hand she wore a small ring with a red stone in it.

Then, as the fog of delirium gradually cleared away, although he was in a state of utter prostration following the fall of temperature, he noticed a strange thing which to him was entirely new. The nurse, in spite of being middle-aged and having lost her looks, the room which he had once hated, every single object, in fact, appeared to him in a new light—serene, clean, familiar, lovable, and, so to speak, appetizing. He noted with surprise that he did not so much look at things as cast his eyes greedily upon them, just as a hungry animal throws itself upon a piece of food after a long fast.

There beside him, for instance, was the little table covered with phials and bottles among which he had seen those filthy little dwarfs chasing each other. Now he saw honest, simple bottles of different-colored or clear glass, with corks or metal tops, and adorned with labels upon which even the flowing, hurried handwriting of the druggist who had written the prescriptions had a reassuring and affectionate look. Those neatly arranged bottles, the powders and liquids that they contained, the writing on each bottle indicating how such powders and liquids were to be used—he felt that all these things wished him well; and he seemed to be repaying their goodwill with a corresponding feeling of sympathy. When he moved his eyes from the little table to the nurse, whose face he could see in profile behind the bottles, he was conscious of the same feeling of contentment and affection. She was middle-aged; but Luca's eyes, though they could see the wrinkles under the make-up which reddened her cheeks and darkened her eyes, could not help loving those wrinkles, desiring them, even, as details that were richly significant, in the same way that one desires a modest-looking but renowned fruit for the delicious juice it contains. He was almost impelled to put out his hand and stroke those cheeks and those eyes. The thoughts, too, that her face inspired in him, dictated as they were by this new feeling of sympathy, were affectionate and penetrating. He reflected that she must have been very beautiful when she was young and that it must be a very bitter thing for her now to be no longer beautiful; also that, judging by appearance, she must in the past have been wealthy and free and that she was working as a nurse in order to earn her living. But his feeling for her had not an erotic origin—like the feeling, mixed up with repulsion, that he had once had for the governess. In fact, the feeling he now had for the woman he had had, shortly before, for the bottles; and when he turned his eyes away from her to look around the room, he had the same feeling for the various pieces of furniture—no longer haunting and fantastically absurd but calm and

familiar, standing quietly round like affectionate old friends. He turned his eyes to the coatstand which he had seen changed into a snail running up and down the walls, and saw now that it was just an ordinary coatstand with three arms; and he was pleased to see that a petticoat and a chemise belonging to the nurse were hanging on it, and was also pleased to notice that they were unpretentious garments, like those of a poor person. Everything, in fact, to these new eyes of his, seemed to have significance—a very humble and homely significance, it is true, but a positive one. To the benevolence that colored all reality with fellow feeling there was added, besides, the sense of an established order, modest but necessary, in which nothing now appeared absurd and devoid of usefulness. Those bottles were just bottles, that coatstand was just a coatstand; nor was there any danger now of seeing the dwarfs' heads sticking out of the former, or of seeing the latter run up the wall.

But his surprise reached its height when the nurse, having fed him, started to wash his face. She took away the tray with the plates and spoons and carried it over to the table by the window; then she spread a bath towel across the bed, disappeared and came back in a moment with an aluminum bowl full of warm water, a piece of soap and a comb. She placed the bowl on the bed, sat down beside it and dipped the soap in the water. As she lightly soaped his face and very gently wiped the soap off again with a little sponge full of delicious warm water, he seemed already to be conscious of a kind of grace and delicacy in his own cheeks. But when, after that, she handed him the mirror and asked him to hold it up while she parted his hair, and he saw his own white, thin face, the feeling that the sight of it inspired in him astonished him profoundly. His face, refined by illness, seemed to have emerged purified from fever and delirium, as a landscape long buffeted and ravaged emerges from the mists of a violent storm. He was conscious of a feeling of love for that adolescent face which looked back at him, dreamy eyed. It was true

that this was the same love that he felt for the nurse and for all the other things; but when he remembered the hatred that he had once felt for himself he saw that it was the most important feature of this new change.

The nurse finished combing his hair—in a way in which he himself never used to do it, that is, with the parting at one side. But Luca had no desire to protest. This, too, was a new and pleasing thing, and he felt almost grateful to her for her mistake. She removed the towel from the bed, took the bowl and went out. In a moment she was back, and she sat down in what was apparently her usual place, behind the little bed table, with a book in her hand. The whole room seemed to concentrate itself round this quiet, familiar movement of hers as if by enchantment, so that it, too, became quiet and familiar. Luca lay silent for some time, and then said: "I should like to sit up in bed, with a pillow or two behind my back."

"Well, you must be careful not to catch cold," she answered. She went out and came back with two pillows. She bent over Luca and, putting her arm round his waist, helped him to pull himself up and fitted in the pillows behind him. This effort was enough to make Luca feel the blood leave his face and his sight darken, as though he were about to faint. She helped him to put on a sweater and sat down again. After a moment Luca asked: "I've been very sick, haven't I?"

Resting her book on her knees and looking at him, the nurse answered: "Yes, very."

"I wanted to die," said Luca, with sincerity.

The nurse got up and passed her hand over his hair, gazing at him in an affectionate manner. Then she said: "But you'll get well now."

Luca looked up at her and did not say anything. A sudden emotion brought tears to his eyes. The nurse went on: "You'll get well if you're obedient and do all the things you ought to do." Without saying a word Luca took her hand and began kissing it gently, reflectively. Meanwhile the tears gushed from his wide open eyes.

ONE EVENING TOWARD THE END of his convalescence Luca, tired of reading, was dozing with his head lying back on the pillow, when the nurse, with the solemn air of one who announces a piece of good news, appeared in the doorway and said: "Now you must get ready . . . the water's running, and in a moment you're going to have your first bath."

"A bath . . . won't it make me feel giddy?" asked Luca.

"Don't worry, I'll be there to help you," she answered. She began preparations, coming and going about the room, precise and busy in her movements—movements which were those of a trained nurse and contrasted strongly with her appearance of a decayed gentlewoman. It looked to Luca as though she were joyful at this new step of his along the road to health; and he was grateful to her because, as he knew, he was to her only one sick person among many and she had no reason to be happy at his recovery; rather—since her salary came to an end with the end of his illness—she had reason to be sorry for it. She went out and came back in a short time with a big bath towel which she spread out to warm on the radiator. Then she went to the wardrobe and took out a camel's-hair dressing gown his mother had recently bought for the time when Luca would be getting up. She arranged the bathrobe on the armchair at the foot of the bed and placed a new pair of slippers on the floor. "A nice hot bath," she said as she turned the slippers with their heels toward the bed; "You'll see how well you feel after it." She pronounced these words in an inviting tone, but almost as if speaking to herself, with an abstraction which made them seem all the more natural and affectionate—as though they came truly from her heart and were not said merely to please Luca. Then she went out again, leaving the door open. The bathroom was on the other side of the passage, at no great distance, and the gay, rushing sound of the

water could be distinctly heard. The nurse dallied for some time, waiting, perhaps, for the bath to fill; then she rushed in breathlessly, took the dressing gown and held it out, open, to Luca, saying: "Come on, quick . . . the bath's ready . . . up you get."

Formerly Luca would have been ashamed to show himself in pyjamas. But the game was altered, and everything which in the past would have repelled him he now accepted, not without satisfaction. The nurse pulled away the coverings and Luca sat up. All at once he felt his head going round and the blood draining away from his face. The nurse was standing in front of him, holding the bath robe open, but he could not think of standing up and remained there, in distress, sitting on the bed, his legs hanging down and his face, gone very white, bent over to one side. She understood, and threw down the dressing gown. "You feel weak . . . of course . . . wait a moment, I'll help you." She placed a robust arm around his waist and helped him to his feet. For a moment Luca had the sensation that his feet were not resting on the floor. The weakness showed itself in a kind of hiatus which had the shape of his legs without having either their substance or their strength. "Now put on the dressing gown . . . come along," he heard the nurse saying. Obediently he turned, allowing her to insert first one of his arms and then the other into the wide sleeves, and then stood still, while she swiftly closed the dressing gown around him. "Now walk," she said, holding him round the waist; "don't be afraid . . . I'm here."

Luca took his first steps, leaning heavily against the nurse, while she supported him around the waist. Her expression was one of carefulness and devotion; and, as if the strength he needed came to him from the sight of her face and the contact of her arm across his back, Luca felt that at every step his feet were regaining confidence and were communicating a new and pleasant sense of solidity and safety to his legs and to the whole of his body. Just as, when he had awoken from the nightmares of delirium and had imagined, looking at the furniture in his room, that he had a positive

appetite for it, so now he felt that he was hungry for the floor upon which he was walking, and that he was receiving more and more nourishment from it with each step that he took. "Perhaps I'm not as weak as I thought," he said, reinvigorated. The nurse nodded her assent as she continued to support him. Closely enlaced, they left the room; the house seemed deserted, as Luca guessed from the darkness and silence in the passage. They went into the bathroom, and the nurse, having made Luca sit down on a stool, closed the door. It was hot as an oven in the bathroom. The bath was full of bluish water that looked as if it were boiling, and the nurse turned off the taps and placed a new piece of soap in the dish. A little embarrassed, Luca slipped off his dressing gown, which she took and hung up on a hook near the door. Left with nothing on but his pyjamas, Luca thought for a moment of asking the nurse to leave the room. But she did not appear to attach any importance to his embarrassment, nor even to have noticed it; and Luca decided that he would do exactly what she told him to do. "Now take off your pyjamas," she said, "and get into the bath ... then I'll soap you."

Obediently Luca rose to his feet and slipped off his pyjama jacket. Then the nurse bent down and lightly untied his trousers and pulled them down to his feet, raising herself again at once, a little flushed in the face; but Luca thought that this was because of the effort of stooping. Naked, he stood there hesitating, but felt the nurse put her arm round his waist again and guide him gently toward the bath. Slowly he got into the scalding water, first with one foot, then with the other, and finally, very gradually, he lay down. "How d'you feel?" asked the nurse, sitting down on a stool and looking fixedly at him. "Very weak," replied Luca. And this was true. In the hot water there came back to him an indescribable feeling of emptiness at the back of the neck, accompanied by a slight nausea. The nurse said: "You must stand up, and I'll soap you well ... You can rinse yourself, and then you must come out of the water at once. It's very weakening if

you stay in long." Luca looked at her and then looked at himself in the bath: indistinct, gently undulating, tinged with a faint bluish light, his own body inspired in him, as his face had done the first time he had seen it in the mirror, a feeling of affection. And the sight of his pubic region, where the brown hairs, dusted over with bright little air bubbles, seemed to fluctuate hither and thither round his sexual organ like seaweed round an anemone in the depths of a clear sea-water pool, did not appear to him in any way indecent but in perfect harmony with the rest of his body, which was chaste, thin and white. "Well, are you going to stand up?" asked the nurse. He gave a start, raised his eyes and realized that she too, from her stool, had, like him, been looking at his body lying in the bottom of the bath. "All right," he said; and rose to his feet.

The water came halfway up his legs. A mirror on the wall in front of him showed him himself, quite naked, and the nurse, red in the face, bending down toward him as she soaped his body. She soaped first his back, then his chest and finally his belly. Luca realized then that, whereas the working of his mind was still languid and slow, his sensibility, refined, perhaps, by illness, caused him to notice many things which at another time would have escaped him. There was, for example, an excess of zeal and professional skillfulness in the alacrity of the nurse which in some way excited him, though his weakened mind was quite unable to define it. The nurse, her hands white with soap, straightened herself up and said: "Now sit down again." Obediently Luca let himself slip down again into the water.

She went out and after a moment came back again, holding the towel with outstretched arms and crying: "Quick—quick, while it's hot." Luca stood up, hesitated a moment with his foot on the edge of the bath, then climbed out. At once the nurse was upon him, wrapped him up tightly, with a sort of affection, in the burning towel: "Isn't it nice and warm?" Luca, all muffled up, could not but be conscious of a glow of well-being—the first for a very long time. "Now you must dry yourself—quickly," she said. Luca sat down on the stool,

and the nurse, on her knees, vigorously rubbed his legs. She put so much energy into it that her face was soon scarlet, and in her kneeling attitude there was a quality of vague but passionate adoration that embarrassed Luca. Then, as her hands moved upward over his legs, she lightly touched his groin, and Luca, instinctively quivering, suddenly realized what till that moment he had merely—and almost in spite of himself—suspected: that chance had willed that he and the nurse should find themselves alone in the flat that evening; and that there was going to be a repetition of what had happened between himself and the governess, months before. But with this difference, that his whole spirit was changed and would now accept what at that time he had thought it his duty to refuse.

After that first light, perhaps involuntary touch, the nurse appeared to lose all her energy; and Luca felt that her hands had become hesitant, as though, instead of massaging him, they wished—and yet at the same time did not wish—to caress him. Her hands moved over his body, but seemed anxious at any cost to avoid his groin; and yet it was straight toward his groin that they would slide, every now and then, from the most distant places, in a swift incursion that was rendered rough and clumsy by haste and remorse. These incursions had a particular character of their own; they were like the pecking of a bird or the bite of an animal, at once furtive and eager. In other respects too, the nurse—flushed in the face, her head bent so that her eyes were concealed—now showed plainly the nature of the feeling that was agitating her. Luca looked at her, and it seemed to him that her flush deepened more and more as the circling strokes of the massage closed in more narrowly about his belly. The whole of that big body of hers, bent forward from the knees, seemed to be straining with the desire, at once encouraged and opposed, to escape from the limits of mere massage into a kind of contact that was freer and of a different nature. But, in contrast to what had once happened with the governess, he did not feel any desire to draw back, any repugnance. He felt himself to

be no more than an object in her hands, entirely without any will of his own apart from the wish to be docile and obedient. These reflections almost made him forget the woman and her passion. Finally, after one more positive, more satisfied touch, she rose to her feet, saying: "There, now you can get dressed."

Luca got up and the towel fell to the floor. The massage had produced in him a visible erection; but he noticed with surprise that he felt no shame. This, too, was something new; and it seemed another sign of his new confidence in himself and in the world. Once it would have been impossible for him to accept a physical excitement of this kind simply, without disgust, as without vanity. He would have resented it in every case as a revolt, and his first impulse would have been to oppose and destroy it. But now these manifestations of instinct—whether it was a question of himself or of the nurse, of his desire or hers, and even when they occurred in a manner unforeseen and entirely beyond his control—all these manifestations, it seemed to him, should be welcomed, as so many aspects of a completely lovable, completely understandable reality. There he stood, naked, in front of this woman, with the signs of the excitement of his senses visible in his own body; yet, in spite of it, he felt no desire to be elsewhere or to be other than what he was. Lost in astonishment, he started violently at the nurse's voice saying again: "Well, are you going to get dressed?"

In silence he allowed her to slip on his pyjamas and wrap him again in the dressing gown. As she opened the door she asked him: "How do you feel?"

"Fine."

They left the bathroom and started along the carpeted floor of the passage. The nurse was supporting him, and had now reassumed her usual attitude toward him, professional but solicitous. But in the passage Luca was assailed again by a feeling of extreme weakness; his sight was dimmed; a great coldness chilled his forehead and his temples; and, with a murmur of: "I'm feeling ill," he abandoned himself to the nurse's

supporting arm. He realized he must be coming out of a faint when he found he was sitting on his bed with the nurse applying a damp cloth to his forehead. "It's nothing," she said, "it's the bath that has weakened you." Luca did not answer, and the nurse, having removed his dressing gown, turned back the bed clothes and, hoisting up his legs, helped him into bed. He noticed the freshness of the clean sheets as a pleasure which he owed to her. "Now you must try and rest," he heard her say. The door closed and he was left alone.

DURING THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED the nurse never once alluded to the incident in the bathroom. On his side, Luca did not think of reminding her of it, not so much because he would not have liked to follow up those first approaches as because he felt more inclined to submit passively to her will, whatever it might be, rather than exercise his own. It was enough for him, in any case, to understand the meaning of that experience; it mattered little if the experience itself stopped at its very beginning. But he realized that she was thinking about him and about what had happened in the bathroom, and he awaited the result of these reflections with some curiosity. If he went on to attempt, in his own mind, an exact definition of his feeling, he observed that—apart from a strong but generic attraction such as he might have felt for any other woman in similar circumstances—he continued to cherish that affectionate, comprehensive, disinterested feeling that now marked his constant attitude toward everybody and everything. This attitude manifested itself in a polite but sincere curiosity about her character and past. She was now not so much nursing him as keeping him company; and as confidence grew she reached the point of telling him many stories about her life—which were all, or almost all, concerned with her love affairs

with a large number of men, of the most diverse ages and conditions. As Luca had imagined, she had been in easy circumstances in her younger days; then her husband had died and in order to make a living she had been compelled to take various jobs, the last of which had been nursing. At first hesitating and reticent, when she saw that Luca showed no surprise she became more and more frank, and finally, in her own rather pathetic way, positively immodest. Hers had been a perfectly ordinary life, full of errors and vanities; and she, in turn, was a perfectly ordinary person with all the prejudices of those who have come down in the world—as, for example, that her job was unworthy of her. But these errors and vanities seemed to Luca, thanks to his new indulgent attitude, to be not merely excusable but lovable as well. He was pleased, above all, with her illusion that she was still young and beautiful, an illusion that once upon a time he would have found ridiculous but which was now a vigorous feature of her character. One day when they were speaking of feminine beauty, she rose to her feet and strutted about the room, pulling her dress tightly over her hips and belly and saying: "Look at me and tell me honestly how many women younger than me can boast of a figure like mine." Her eyes sparkled, she smoothed down her buttocks with both her hands, uplifted her bosom and turned her head this way and that. Luca could not help smiling. But he was pleased when he realized that it was a sympathetic smile.

During this time his strength was returning to him, and now he could take a bath by himself. The first few times the nurse still helped him, but without any recurrence of the disturbances and excitements of the first evening. She seemed really to have given up hope of Luca, but not without a certain sort of affectionate, melancholy regret on her part, as though in the sacrifice of desire she had found a new, albeit sad, love-motif. Luca came to understand this one day when, lying with his eyes half-closed and pretending to be asleep, he had seen her gazing at him for a long time, with a singular expression on her face which he had

not at once been able to define. It was a look of perplexity and almost of scorn. It was as though instead of searching in her own consciousness she had been seeking, in his face, the reasons for her own sacrifice; and as though, not finding them there, she had become angry with herself for not having the courage to throw scruples aside and take her pleasure of him as she longed to do.

One evening, having brought him his supper tray, she sat down on the bed and said: "I think this is the last day I shall be staying with you."

Luca raised his eyes from his plate and with a candor not entirely devoid of malice said: "I'm sorry . . . and when are you going?"

"Tomorrow evening," she answered. And then she added, looking straight at him: "I'm sorry too."

Luca looked at her. She was sitting on the bed in an uncomfortable position, her bust and her face twisted round toward him and one hand pressing heavily on the coverlet for support. He noticed, beneath the redness of the rouge on her cheeks, the flush of another, warmer redness, a redness of a stirring and excitement of the blood. As on that day in the bathroom, her eyes, like sparkling stones in old, dull settings, shone through their make-up, pathetically. She added: "I had got quite accustomed to you."

Luca said nothing. She went on, lowering her voice: "Perhaps I was a little in love with you too."

Luca had expected anything rather than this declaration of love. The only amorous experience of his life had been that of his brief relationship with the governess. And he had imagined that, like her, the nurse would herself take the initiative without any words, imposing her own desire upon his passivity. Taken unawares by the sentimental character of a passion that he had hitherto imagined to be imperative and sensual, he was lost for a moment in a cold, surprised embarrassment. He said, in a colorless voice: "Really?"

"Yes," replied the nurse, "but it doesn't matter." She shook her head and lowered her eyes, with a movement of her mouth as if repressing a sob. Then Luca

said, with sincerity: "I think I was rather fond of you too . . . but it depended on you . . ."

He left his sentence unfinished and looked at her. It was the truth, he thought, nothing but the truth. But from whence came this self-assurance, not devoid of malice, this self-assurance like that of an accomplished seducer? He was pleased with it, as a new endowment, both as an aid to action and to entering into relations with other people. She raised sparkling eyes toward him and asked: "And so, if I had wanted to . . . ?" Luca nodded. He was thinking now that she would leap upon him, rather as she had done in the bathroom, but with a more open violence and without any hypocrisy; and he was wondering how he ought to behave. At that moment his parents were at table and would not come for at least half an hour. Would that time—so short—be long enough? And might not his mother, for some reason or other, come in before the time? He was conscious that despite these doubts and fears he was not afraid of love nor of its consequences; and he merely added, judiciously: "I thought you wanted to, that day in the bathroom . . . there was no one in the house and it would have been easy . . ."

Contrary to what he had expected, the nurse did not throw herself upon him but rose to her feet and, looking at him from a little way off put out her arm and slowly stroked his face. Then she said: "You were too weak that day . . . besides, you're just a boy . . ."

Luca reflected that this, too, was an undeniable truth and said nothing, merely lowering his eyes. The nurse took his chin in her hand—just as you do with children when you ask them what they want—and said: "So, if I came tonight . . . would you like me to come?"

Raising his eyes toward her, Luca answered, quite simply: "I would certainly like you to come." Erect and motionless, she brooded over him with her brilliant eyes, so young, so different from the old, dead, painted eyelids between which they shone. Then, in a voice full of promise, generous, maternal, she an-

nounced: "Well then . . . if you'd really like me to . . . I'll come."

Luca nodded, as if to say that it was a good plan. The nurse went on: "I'll come . . . but we must be careful . . . we mustn't make any noise." For some time she had no longer been sleeping in Luca's room behind the screen; and Luca reflected that she was giving this piece of advice to herself rather than to him. "In a couple of hours, then," she concluded. She looked at him a moment longer, as if to observe the effect of her promise upon him; then took the tray and went out.

Left alone, Luca took up a novel from the little table by the bed and began reading. He soon realized that he was not following the meaning of the words. He felt his cheeks burning fiercely, as though the woman's glances, so laden with desire, had scorched him where they had touched him, from brow to neck. This burning sensation was pleasant and exciting and gave him a feeling of urgent vitality such as he had never known. In order to distract his mind from it, and from the excitement that accompanied it, he began thinking over what had happened. He examined his attitude toward this woman and told himself that it could not have been more honest nor more sincere. She had told him she loved him; but he had limited his reply to saying that he would be pleased if she came; and this was the exact truth. He thought that he would derive pleasure from her coming as he derived pleasure, ever since he had awoken from his delirium, from everything that happened, from every presence, every relationship; and he was glad that he did not experience, toward the nurse, any feeling that was more intense than or different from the feeling inspired in him by other people and by all inanimate things. He was, in reality, hungry for this woman, and this hunger made her desirable to him; but the same way he was hungry for the peaceful light shed by the lamp at his bedside, for the pieces of furniture standing in the shadows, for the night, for the silence that he imagined outside the house, and even for the tiny creaking of the worm that bored its tunnel in the wood

of the table. These things, and many others besides, because of this hunger that made them appetizing to him, were all equally lovable and together composed a world which was new to him and at last, acceptable.

As these thoughts passed through his mind he began to feel sleepy. While he was in this drowsy state his father and mother came in, as they always did, and after the customary recommendations and questions, which he answered vaguely, kissed him and went away. It seemed to him also that the nurse was busy round his bed, tucking in those same blankets which in two hours' time she would be throwing aside so as to lie down beside him; but he was not quite certain that this was not a kind of hallucination. For he was really very sleepy; and as soon as his parents left him, he dropped into unconsciousness.

He slept for some time, with a good, solid sleep that was an expression of that same hunger which, while he was awake, gave him an appetite for everything and everybody. And he had a curious dream—suggested, perhaps, by this hunger—in which he thought he was a tree. Shaped like a tree—black, leafless, rain-soaked, numb with cold—he was standing on the top of a bare, frostbound hill, stretching out his arms which were branches and his open fingers which were twigs. An immense landscape extended all round, with hills and woods and rivers and fields, and the whole of this landscape was streaked with snow and darkened by winter mists. The sky, heavy with black, unmoving clouds, was mirrored in the flooded fields, and over all there was a profound silence, as of a dead, timeless world. But far away the sun was rising on the horizon. At first it was only a cold, red globe; then, as it rose gradually into the sky, putting the clouds to flight, it became more and more clear and radiant, and he could feel its heat even through the ice-cold bark. Beneath the rays of the sun a vast movement took place over the whole landscape, as though the woods, and every single tree in them, had shaken off their winter stillness, as though the rivers were swollen with floodwater, the fields fermenting with life, the hills softened

and filled with nourishment, like a woman's breasts. All of a sudden a harsh sound—exultant, prolonged, amorous, like the call of a hunting horn—filled the air, breaking that cold silence. And to him it seemed that, starting from his roots deep-sunk in the earth, a wave of joyous hunger spread upward through his trunk; and this, overflowing the casing of bark, burst out through his branches in a thousand green and shining buds. These buds, in their turn, swiftly opened, became leaves, tendrils, boughs. And he felt himself growing, multiplying, pullulating endlessly, in an irresistible, fabulous rush of abundance, in every direction and from every part. All at once he was no longer a tree, but a man, standing upright with his arms raised toward the sun. And, with this sensation of rush and thrusting in his limbs, he awoke. The room was plunged in shadow, except for a small circle of light round the little red-shaded lamp on the bed table. The clock pointed to a quarter past midnight. In a few minutes the nurse would be coming.

Then, as he looked round the darkened room and thought about the nurse, it seemed to him that this hunger of his, in an impulse of impatience and voracity, was passing, at one step, beyond the limits of the present time and of the place where he now was, and was rushing forward into the future, both in time and in space. There, in the darkness, he seemed to see, rising to the surface, the life that remained for him to live—the places, the human faces, the movements, the meetings. He had an overwhelming sensation of aggressive freedom, of unlimited exploration, of lightning flashes of vision; as though the future, catching alight and burning in the fire of imagination, had been consumed and discounted in an instant, complete even in its smallest details. He saw that this was his life; and that now it only remained to him to be patient and to live it out to the end. His eyes filled with tears; and an uncontrollable agitation ran through him. He started to cry aloud meaningless words, turning over and over in the bed and looking intently into the darkness, as though he longed to illuminate it and see the

curtain of the future torn asunder. While he was at the height of this exaltation, he heard the door open.

It was the nurse. Below the fur-trimmed coat which she had thrown hurriedly over her shoulders appeared the crumpled edge of a long muslin nightgown. Luca saw her make a sign of silence with her finger on her lips. Her eyes were shining more brightly than ever, seeming to light up her whole face despite the darkness of the room. She closed the door cautiously and very slowly turned the key in the lock; then took a table napkin from the bed table and wrapped it round the lamp. She did all this without hurrying, like someone doing a thing he had done a thousand times in his life already; and Luca, lying back on his pillows, his arms spread out on the bed in front of him, watched her without excitement or embarrassment, with a curiosity that he felt to be innocent, as though she were not getting the place ready for a love scene but performing the preordained gestures of some unknown rite of her own. Having finished her preparations, she came over to the bed and, standing majestically erect, looking straight into his eyes with her own sparkling ones, she raised both her hands, took the coat from her shoulders and placed it on a chair. In this gesture she bent sideways, revealing the massive but unshapely character of her body—her hips not rounded but almost square, with broad surfaces of flesh pressing against the stuff of the nightgown; her back broad and thick; her arms gone flabby. She stood still for a moment, as if to allow Luca to admire her at leisure; then, with a vigorous, impatient gesture, she raised her arms and began slipping the nightgown over her head. Higher and higher the muslin rose, like the curtain of a theatre, but hesitant and awkward, jerkily disclosing the spectacle beneath it—her legs big but straight, like towers of brown, pink-flushed flesh; the hollow of her lap, the only retired, shadowy place among so much displayed profusion; her belly, overflowing vessel of desire; and finally her bosom, narrow between the two broad hollows below her raised arms, like a dark and hilly tract of ground between two

white, deserted roads. With a final pull, at once slow and full of imperious resolution, she freed herself completely from her nightdress, throwing it to the floor, and stood facing Luca naked, with her customary air of munificence, of promise, of magnanimity. She behaved, thought Luca, as though she had been still young and beautiful and as though he looked upon her as such; and this pleased him because it seemed to him a lovable, generous illusion. When she considered that Luca had looked at her long enough, she turned back the bedclothes and slipped majestically into bed, lying down at his side. It was not so much an embrace he experienced as a sinking of the whole of himself in a limitless expanse of flesh. And when she passed her hand unhurriedly over his body, seeking his sex, and, having found it, took hold of it by the root as though she wished to tear it away, implanting it then in her own body, he had the precise feeling that she was taking him by the hand and introducing him, a reverent novice, into a mysterious cave dedicated to a religious rite. This, he thought, was the life he had formerly invoked, and little did it matter if it presented itself to him in the garb of autumn. Filled with gratitude, he found himself kissing the thin brown face with the closed eyes, motionless as an effigy. But was it the face of the nurse, or that of some deity risen up from the earth for his possession? Certainly between his hands and those limbs that lay beneath his own there passed a tremor of veneration. Meanwhile the sense of relief continued, and, with its freshness and buoyancy, redeemed the ardor and the gravity of the embrace.

THE NURSE WENT AWAY next day, as she had announced; and Luca was left with a feeling neither of regret nor of disgust, but rather of gratitude for his final initiation not merely into physical love but also into that more general love for all things, the first

glimmer of which had reached him when he awoke from his delirium. He felt he had at last found a new and quite personal way of looking at reality—a way that was composed of sympathy and of patient expectation. This way of looking at things, he observed, permitted a rhythm of thought much calmer, much fuller, much more serene than before, and with it a vision that was no longer direct and aggressive but scrupulously, ineffably hesitant and cautious. Now, he thought, he would see things first with those new eyes which had opened that night inside him, and only afterward with the eyes which at his birth had been dazzled by the first light of day. Second and truer mother, the nurse had given him a second birth when, in his desire for death, he had been already dead. But he knew that this second birth could never have taken place if he had not first desired, so sincerely, so wholeheartedly, to die.

In the meantime there was more and more talk in the house of his departure for the mountains. Luca's parents had engaged a room for him in a sanatorium for convalescents and it only remained to fix the date of his journey. There was no mention of lessons now, except in reference to a distant day when Luca would be strong enough to face them again without harm to himself. While these preparations were going on, Luca, sitting wrapped in blankets in an armchair near the window, continued, half-asleep, to contemplate the sky which, as spring came on, grew steadily clearer and warmer. He enjoyed his own passive state now, ever since he had recognized, in things and in people, an order which was still unknown but capable of lifting him up and carrying him far away. Content to have become a part of this order, he found a new strength in accepting its mysterious, external nature.

At last the day of departure arrived. It was the end of March, and although the air was warm Luca's mother, who was going to accompany him to the sanatorium, muffled him up in several sweaters and a heavy overcoat. Luca, enveloped in this overcoat, remained quite inert, lying back in the armchair in the room which now seemed strange and filled with the light of

departure—just as if he had been a suitcase or some other inanimate object. His passive state continued, persisted even at the moment when he ought to have at least taken a share in the arrangements made for him by others, rendered him inert just when inertia seemed impossible. He could hear his parents and the maids bustling about as they carried down the luggage; and he himself remained there motionless, just as though he were not going away. He felt very warm —perhaps too warm, and yet it was pleasant, also— and, without thinking of anything at all, he looked out at the pale morning sky. If he closed one eye, a flaw in the glass, tear-shaped, widened out in the sky, forming as it were a great white cleft. He heard his mother, entering the room breathlessly, cry out: "But what are you doing here? The taxi's down there, waiting"; and it was only then that he could make the effort to move. Formerly he would never have been able to resist the paltry infection of the fuss of departure, even if he showed it only by the display of a hostile phlegm. But this time, as he realized, he was truly indifferent as to whether he went or did not go, arrived or did not arrive. There were other trains, or—if it came to that—they could just stay. Later, while his mother was running nervously from one office to another, buying the tickets and getting them stamped, he let himself sink again into the depths of that satisfying inertia. Sitting on a suitcase, beneath the black and noisy dome of the station, among the rush and chatter of the crowd, he almost forgot that he was on the point of starting on a journey. Like a thread that is too weak, his participation in outside life snapped continually, and he did not trouble to refasten it.

But there was his mother, as there had been the taxi, as there would be the train and all those other means by which his inertia could be transported through space.—That same train, he could not help thinking as he obediently followed the luggage-laden porter, against which he had vomited months before, coming back from his holiday, in that crazy revolt of his whole body. Once in the train he closed his eyes drowsily as he sat holding the bundle of newspapers

and reviews that his mother had bought for him. He heard the engine whistle and was conscious that beneath him the wheels were beginning to turn, and he continued to doze. When he opened his eyes again he was surprised to see the suburbs slipping past the window below the railway embankment. Through top floor windows he could see people moving about in rooms among unmade beds they had just left. Whistling, the train steadily gathered speed, the houses became more and more rare, and then, after the train had crossed a bridge at full speed and with a tearing clatter, the country began.

The train rushed on, and he felt this rushing movement as a delicious contrast to his own inertia. What else was the train, in relation to him, but a thing with a purpose, a direction, a will—as, previously, the nurse's passion had been, and his parents' solicitude? He thought that it would be fine to go on like this all one's life. The train, the nurse, his parents—these would be succeeded by larger, if not more mysterious, forces; and he would trust himself to them with equal confidence and equal delight. He saw himself as a ragged, wounded, hungry soldier, in an army of whose orders and objectives he knew nothing; as a beggar, in a misery for which he was not responsible and of which he was not even conscious; rich, with wealth of which he had not earned one halfpenny; exalted to a power which he had never sought; a priest in a church of which he did not know the rites; and finally dead—the last delight—through a catastrophe which he had neither foreseen nor wished to avoid. The rattling of the train as it crossed the switches, the swift, regular beat of the wheels, the whistle of the engine tearing to shreds the silence of the countryside, even the backward flight of that same countryside past the train windows—all these stimulated the flow of his thoughts. Yes, he was now in the midst of a broad, swirling, powerful stream in which he was but a straw that cannot help being carried along, scarcely hoping to keep afloat to the end. And closing his eyes, he abandoned himself to it trustfully, as he had abandoned himself, a few days before in the arms of the nurse.

In fact, he closed his eyes to examine this thought more carefully; and his mother, anxious for his comfort and thinking he wished to sleep, put a cushion behind his head with gentle and loving hands. Until then he had not thought of the nurse except with vague reference to that initiation of which she had been the unconscious instrument. Now he sought to define in his own mind the true and deeper meaning of that initiation. He remembered that at the moment of the embrace he had felt a sudden, strong desire to enter completely, with the whole of his body, into the woman's belly, and to curl up there, in that warm, rich darkness, just as he had lain curled up before he was born. But now he understood that that womb was nothing else than the womb of life itself, hitherto repudiated by him but which the woman, imperiously, had compelled him to accept. Yes, he concluded, that is what life should be: not sky and earth and sea, not human beings and their organizations, but rather a dark, moist cavern of loving, maternal flesh into which he could enter confidently, sure that he would be protected there as he had been protected by his mother all the time she was carrying him in her womb. Life meant the sinking of oneself in this flesh and feeling its darkness, its engulfing power, its convulsion, to be beneficent, vital things. Suddenly he understood the significance of the sense of relief that had refreshed him while the nurse was crushing him in her embrace.

This thought kept him company during the whole afternoon, and after supper, when the sleeping berths were let down and his mother and he had gone to bed, for a good part of the night until he fell asleep. While he was asleep, the train crossed a long steel bridge over a very broad river, and he heard the resounding din of the girders beneath its weight. Much later, he was aware of a lively clatter of voices and of echoing footsteps in a sudden stillness, and realized that the train had come into a big station and stopped there. But this was still in the depths of the night, and turning over on his side he went off to sleep again and was not conscious either of the train shunting as it changed engines, nor of its leaving the station again. He went

on sleeping, waking every now and again and becoming conscious of the movement of the train with the same pleasure each time. When he finally woke up the day was well advanced, and he knew by the slow and labored rhythm of the wheels that the train was going upgrade.

His mother helped him to wash and dress; then the porter put up the sleeping berths and he sat by the window and looked out at the landscape. The train was close by the side of a mountain and was turning and twisting round a narrow gorge at the bottom of which could be seen a rushing torrent. Another mountain slope rose steeply on the far side of the torrent, shutting out the sky. Luca gazed at the foaming waters of the torrent, at the uptorn masses of rock round which the waters dashed and broke, and at the thick pine forests which flowed down the mountainside till they bathed their roots in those tumultuous waves. In the pale light of the cloudy morning the water of the torrent looked dirty, grayish-white in color, the rocks a rusty red and the pines a dark, melancholy, dim green. An air of ancient and indifferent dullness inclosed this alpine solitude. It was the first time Luca had seen the mountains and thought they were not so beautiful as he had believed; and he felt disappointed.

But the train, as it wound around the side of the mountain, came out into an open place and Luca saw, at the far end of the gorge, towering above two smaller mountains entirely covered with forest, a snow-covered peak which looked to him immensely high. The clouds in the sky had parted and the sun, lighting up this distant snow, made it sparkle. And then, he did not know why, at the sight of that untouched whiteness, so majestic and so lonely, a sudden elation seized him. The idea of being carried along and of trustfully allowing himself to be carried toward an unknown goal came back to him; but this time it was to some extent modified by the entirely new feeling of being carried and of allowing himself to be carried toward those snows that were so lofty and so white. He kept his wide open eyes fixed on the mountain peak; and the more he looked, the more he felt that trustful, drunken

exultation growing within him. He knew there was no material reason for rejoicing just because he caught sight of the snowy top of a mountain; and yet he could not help realizing that it was that particular sight which started up the mechanism, so long dislocated, of his deepest hopes. Almost without meaning to, he turned toward his mother and asked: "What about the nurse?"

His mother, surprised, answered: "I suppose she's looking after some other invalid."

Yes, she looked after me well, thought Luca. And he said: "She was splendid . . . really, without her, I shouldn't have got well so quick."

"There's no need to exaggerate," said his mother, slightly offended at his forgetting the attentions that she herself had showered upon him, "but certainly she was excellent."

"Yes, she was splendid," repeated Luca.

"By the way," said his mother, "she must have got quite fond of you. She telephoned several times to know how you were."

"And what did you answer?"

"That you were quite well again."

Luca closed his eyes. At that same moment the train, with a long and mournful whistle, plunged into a tunnel. When he opened his eyes again he saw nothing but darkness, while a damp wind blew in his face from the dark walls of the tunnel, mixed with a faint drizzle of water and puffs of steam. Echoing from the vault of the tunnel, the beat of the wheels sounded to him like a monotonous, exultant voice repeating the same words over and over again. He seemed to be able to distinguish these words—the same words, full of hope, that had born him company ever since his awakening from delirium, day by day during his slow recovery; and he knew that, from now onward, not only the clatter of a train in a tunnel or the whiteness of snow on a mountain peak, but all things would have a meaning for him and would speak to him in their own mute language. Then the train, with another whistle, came out into the light of day.